

Prologue: Dreams

The dreams came in the dead of night, long after Harry had fallen away from the physical world. They were garbled, with cut-off screams and cold, muffled voices hissing back and forth between one another. Occasionally he would see an image: a snake...a pair of glowing red eyes...a cowering figure...a wand held in a red-scaled hand.

And when he awoke, his scar would burn. Burn like it hadn't since he'd confronted Voldemort during his first year. It burned like it did when the Dark Lord drew close to him.

He fought back, using everything he'd been taught by Snape to block out the Dark Lord's thoughts, to fend off his mental assault.

He felt he was partially successful. He'd often feel frustration, but he could tell that it was not his own. The emotion was alien, laced with hatred and loathing of a kind he simply didn't possess. A kind of loathing and hatred that made it possible for a man to relish his enemy's pain, to gain pleasure from inflicting agony and suffering.

The pains in his scar worsened with each night. Daphne was helpless to stop them, unable to comprehend how her sworn enemy was reaching across the distance to harm her ward. She helped him with his Occlumency, sleeping lightly, occasional reaching out and entering his mind to help him fight off Voldemort. It was cold and dark when Voldemort was in his head.

He protected the Prophecy by sheer will, building mental barriers by himself. The architect of the Great Wall of China could have hardly done a better job. And in Harry's mind, there was no traitor to let the enemy in. There was only resistance, both from himself and his magic, which would lash out and burn Voldemort when he came too close. There was no way of scaling the walls, for they stretched infinitely upward. It was all a matter of will, and that Harry possessed in abundance.

He came again, pushing through his Occlumency barriers with ease. Harry allowed a bit of his panic to slip through, then struck. His magic

blasted Voldemort's presence away, hurling him out of Harry's mind and back to wherever he came from.

Harry awoke.

Harry's eyes opened wide, and he stared into the darkness of his room in the ancestral home of the Dressler Family. He closed his eyes again, taking several deep breaths in an effort to calm his racing heart. His scar burned, but the pain was distant and more uncomfortable than painful.

He sat up in bed, and shivered in his sweat soaked pajamas as a breeze wafted through the partly open window. He swung his feet down onto the floor, then reached onto the nightstand for his wand. Tiredly, he performed a Time Spell. It was just after six in the morning. He'd actually stayed asleep for longer than usual. The dreams hadn't been as bad recently, though whether it was because Voldemort wasn't sending them or he was getting better at blocking the Dark Lord was unclear. Daphne seemed frustrated by how helpless she was to stop Harry's suffering. But no one knew where the Dark Lord was. Most didn't even understand that he was still...*in existence*.

Harry waved his wand at his curtains and they opened, letting in the morning sun. He'd actually been fooled by how little light had penetrated the heavy emerald green curtains of Dressler Manor. He'd been deceived into believing it was still the middle of the night.

Yawning, he stripped out of his pajamas, slipped on a pair of shorts, a t-shirt, and his trainers, and left his room. He headed down the hallway to one of the staircases and down to the ground floor. If Daphne was awake, he couldn't tell. Her room was pretty far from his, almost in the opposite wing of the large manor. He went down through the kitchen and out one of the side doors, and began to run.

Physical training had been a part of his life ever since he'd arrived home at Dressler Manor. Daphne had been working him hard, trying to prepare him for his combat training. She had been among a number of Aurors who believed that physical strength and endurance were as important as magical strength and endurance. A good duelist didn't just stand there and allow a spell to break through their

defenses; he dodged, advanced and retreated, continuously moving about to keep his senses sharp and make himself a harder target. And if the opportunity presented itself, it was always easier to physically take down an enemy than wear them down in a prolonged duel. Daphne described how she'd used her strength and agility to take down both Sirius and Pettigrew. Another important point was that although Daphne didn't believe in dueling with swords, it was a good alternative to be able to draw upon, especially if one was fighting an opponent they matched in skill and power.

Harry knew that Blaise had been training with swords for years, proving that some pureblood families still did it. But if he were to have an instructor in that area, it would not be Daphne. But on the subject of dueling with wands and spells? There weren't many better.

Daphne had taught him a number of curses, though only a few of them were classified as Dark. She'd taught him the Severing Curse, one that was clearly Dark and might get him expelled from Hogwarts if he used it at the wrong time. It was potentially deadly, as one might expect. But Daphne insisted that he know it. She'd worked hard with him to refine his Slicing Curse, working on his accuracy and power. He had to be careful not to overcharge it, but Daphne hoped that the amount of power he possessed would not just allow him to cast more powerful spells, but also to last much longer in a duel. His Slicing Curse could now rattle Daphne's Servos Shield, which was quite an accomplishment in itself. He'd also worked hard to refine his Striking Curse, and had begun to learn the Bludgeoning Curse and Flinging Hex. The latter was an extremely useful little spell, one that allowed a person to temporarily hurl his opponent away, and get a chance to recover physically and magically. It could also be used to throw objects at an opponent.

However, what Daphne had done, almost to the point of obsession, was work on his defense skills. She'd taught him a half-dozen defensive strategies, including a variety of dodges and their accompanying recoveries. She'd had him practice his Shielding Spell over and over again, improving both the resilience of the shield and the speed at which he could conjure it. He could not deflect everything Daphne threw at him, but he was more than capable of defending himself. Daphne even complimented him on several

occasions, and getting a compliment out of her while dueling was about as difficult as getting water from a rock.

He continued to run at a leisurely pace, moving onto a path that traced along the outside of the Dressler's land. There was a small lake about a half-mile from the back of the house, and Harry would often run around it. Harry had hardly been in poor physical shape to begin with, but Daphne insisted that he build up his endurance. Truth be told, he enjoyed his morning runs, as they gave him a chance to clear his mind of everything that was troubling him.

It was early August now, just days after his 14th birthday. He'd received letters from all of his friends, along with some birthday gifts. He'd been slightly surprised that no one except Tonks had shown up to see him. He knew that Hermione was spending most of the summer in France, traveling with her parents. But he didn't know what was up with Ginny. Her letters told him nothing of the small redhead's mental state. She seemed...perfectly normal. He often thought of the way she'd behaved after her ordeal in the Forest, when she'd be tortured with the Cruciatus Curse, with Daphne arriving just in time to save her. But he'd always sensed that something else had happened, something else that she hadn't told either him or Hermione about.

He'd received gifts, of course. Hermione had included with her letter a rather interesting, self-translating book about French Magical History. It was always interesting to find out how many Muggle legends were, in fact, Muggles. Accomplishments often said little; Charlemagne was a Muggle, while Henry IV was a wizard. So was Louis Pasteur, who had invented a process using Muggle technology that killed bacteria in milk and other liquids.

Tonks had given him a set of combat robes. While charmed so that they remained light-weight and easy to move in, they were reinforced in crucial areas by dragon hide. They provided remarkably good protection, and were highly coveted by those outside of the Ministry. The Aurors were, naturally, issued them at graduation. Tonks had managed to procure an extra pair and charmed them black, rather than the usual red. Daphne had been a bit wary of the risk that the recent Auror School graduate had taken, but the young woman had

blown it off, obviously unafraid of being caught. She'd just been happy to have a chance to see the boy she thought of as a younger brother. And Harry, in turn, looked at her as an older sister. She was just enjoyable to be around, and she could always brighten his spirits. And despite her clumsiness, she was a damn good Auror, and getting better. At this point, the Aurors weren't exactly acting as Dark Wizard Catchers, more as policemen. Despite this, Tonks had already been commended for showing excellent leadership skills during a particularly difficult raid on an illegal potions shop, when the owner had attempted to resist and injured one of the other young Aurors. Tonks was quite humble about the whole thing, even somewhat embarrassed by the attention she was getting. She'd continued to work with Harry's Metamorphic abilities, trying to move past simply changing colors and styles of physical features and moving on to changing bone structure. That wasn't going so well, and Harry was beginning to wonder if he'd ever be able to do it. He'd messed himself up and been unable to fix it three times in all. Daphne had healed him while Tonks rolled on the ground laughing.

Harry felt a sharp pain in his left calf and stopped, coming up lame. He cursed at the pain and tried to massage the tightness away. He limped over to a tree stump near the side of the path and sat down, kneading the hard muscle. He *knew* he should have stretched before he went running. However, lost in his thoughts, he'd forgotten to, and now he was paying the price. He gritted his teeth and tried to focus elsewhere. It wasn't difficult; he had so many different things to think about these days. He still eagerly awaited a letter from the father of Daphne Greengrass, but as of yet, nothing had arrived. He'd toyed with the idea of talking to Blaise about this latest development, but he had gotten the idea from the Greengrass heiress that he was supposed to keep the news of the possible alliance secret, with the exception of his guardian, of course. Daphne had been wary, but not as much as Harry had feared. She didn't trust Aiden Greengrass, but she didn't seem to dislike him as she disliked Blaise's parents.

Harry had regularly sent and received posts from his only friend in his dormitory. The two had established a solid, if cautious and occasionally awkward, friendship. And Blaise knew a lot more about Purebloods than Harry did. The complication was that he was exceedingly loyal to his parents, and that there were few things he'd be

willing to keep from them. Blaise could be witty when he wanted to, and the boy was quite good at implanting hidden meanings in his words. Some of them Harry picked up on, some of them he didn't.

There was also the letter he'd gotten from Luna. He *still* was trying to decipher the meaning of it, despite the fact that it had arrived in mid-June. It hadn't been a letter so much as sixteen separated sentences that mostly seemed to be alterations of conventional sayings and phrases in a way that might have been trying to send a message, or at least had *some* significance. But *To be curious is to be a cat* wasn't exactly the most clear of signals. He'd need to run down the enigmatic Ravenclaw. They were long overdue for a conversation.

The pain slowly began to fade from his calf and the muscle softened, he tested out his weight on it. He'd probably have to move gingerly to avoid re-injuring it, but he could probably finish his jog around the property. He got up and set off at a slow pace, and managed to keep the strain to a minimum. He was soon lost in his thoughts once more.

School would be beginning in less than a month, and Harry was already trying to anticipate the kind of reception he would get. Many now knew that he possessed well-above-average magical power. Would he be respected? Feared? Envied? He honestly couldn't be sure. He knew that he might at least gain the attention of some purebloods he'd been seeking to impress for the entire school year, but, with the exception of Blaise and possibly Greengrass, failed in his efforts.

He managed to make it back to the manor house without that much difficulty, his senses assaulted upon entry by the aroma of fresh eggs and sausage. He entered the dining room to find that the House Elves had prepared their usual morning feast. Daphne sat at the end of the table, reading the *Daily Prophet*; she was scowling at something. "Skeeter?" he guessed. Daphne despised the vindictive, petty commentary of the glorified gossip columnist, who was for some reason taken as the ultimate authority on a number of issues that, it was clear, she knew nothing about. She'd emerged towards the end of First War with her pieces on the trials of Death Eaters putting her into the national spotlight. She'd risen meteorically from there. Daphne had disliked her well before she'd written an article about

how unfit she was to be the guardian of the Boy-Who-Lived. Another piece about how Harry was potentially going Dark earned her further enmity from Daphne. Harry found it somewhat amusing that some day she might report the same thing...only that time, she would be *right*.

Daphne lowered the newspaper, staring at him in mock awe. "How did you *guess*?" she said, feigning astonishment. Harry smiled, and she returned it. "How did you sleep?"

"Better," he told her. "I'm still not getting anything clear from Him, but the disconnected images are still troubling. And my scar hurt. It's almost as if he's...well, he's happy about something.

Daphne frowned. "Your scar is the first of its kind, so I don't know anything about its properties. It *is* possible that you are able to feel the Dark Lord's emotions. I believe that you have enough will and mental defenses to prevent him from possessing you at a distance, though I wouldn't be so sure if you were in close proximity to him." She said this in a matter-of-fact manner, but her voice was somewhat distant, neutral. She obviously wasn't comfortable with the idea, not that she should have been, but she still didn't want to deny that the possibility existed.

Now if only she'd talk about herself in that way instead of me...

It took a great deal of self-control to not betray any emotion in his facial expression, but he did blink. Daphne had gone back to reading and didn't notice. *What in Merlin's name is that supposed to mean?*

The previous year, he might have been expecting a response from a piece of his fractured consciousness. Now, healed mentally as well as physically, there was no answer. *I know exactly what it's supposed to mean*, he thought, *Daphne is as fatalistic as they come, even if she's never said it to me, and she's able to handle that. But what she can't handle is the slightest thought that she might be slipping, that her mind might be cracking. Daphne's mind might be her deadliest weapon.*

Wary of drawing his guardian's attention by staying quiet for so long, he asked, "So is there anything we're going to be focused on today?"

Daphne lowered the newspaper. "You didn't stretch," she said. It was not a question.

Harry sighed. "I was...disoriented and forgot. How did you know?" The answer came to him seconds before the woman sitting across from him answered.

"You are limping. What was it, the calf or the thigh?"

"The calf."

Daphne nodded. "Come here. I know a spell that will loosen the muscle. You should learn it too; a strain is much easier to repair than a tear. You'll need a trained mediwizard to repair muscle damage. If you stretch regularly, you won't run the risk of either. Come over here," she said again. Harry did and presented his left leg. She drew her wand and twirled it in a half-circle. The pain abated instantly, replaced by a lingering soreness.

"Thanks."

"Don't let it happen again," she replied, going back to the newspaper.

This sort of conversation had been rather typical. It wasn't that Daphne was cold to him in general; she took on this persona because she felt it was a motivational tool. She would praise him, but not to an extreme. She was trying to be a mother and an Auror instructor at the same time. This was the result.

"To answer your question," she said, not looking up, "We're going to work on defense mostly. I also want to test out the Flinging Hex. I promise you, if you do it right, there is no better way to get a few seconds of relief in a long duel. Because the spell covers a wider area, it's much more difficult to block. Needless to say, we will be doing exactly that later today; that is, learning how to block it. Never learn a spell you can't defend against. At best, you will look foolish."

She reached underneath a pile of post for something and held it out to him. "It's from Hermione. Hedwig came while you were out."

Harry took the letter from her and ripped it open, then unfolded it and read.

Harry,

France is amazing! We've visited all sorts of historical sites, both Muggle and Magical. What's even better is that some of them are both. My parents have had a lot of questions about the role that wizards played in French history, so naturally, I bought the same book that I gave you. I hope you've had a chance to start it; it's absolutely fascinating. We're coming home in a week, which is too bad because there is still so much to see. We ran into a few friends of my parents and stayed at their house in Normandy for a few days. They have a girl two years older than me, but she's not very interesting, and she also smokes! What a disgusting habit to pick up that young! I tried to engage her in conversation, because I was desperate, but she blew me off. Called me all sorts of rude names, which I won't repeat for the sake of propriety.

That's been one of the few negative experiences I've had on this trip, though. I've even picked up some of the language. It's very different from English; it flows more. I've heard it's similar to Italian and Spanish. Most students my age at Muggle schools have to learn language, so that is one of the few things I'm missing out on by going to Hogwarts. Not that I regret it or anything!

I hope you are well. You said you were having some problems sleeping? I hope Daphne's trying to help you with that. What specifically is it that is bothering you? Maybe I could find a book about it...

I'm very jealous of you, though. I can't wait to see what you've learned from Daphne this summer. I bet she's a terrific instructor. You'll have to teach Ginny and me a few things this coming year. I do hope you haven't been learning anything illegal, though I suppose that the Ministry is somewhat strict in that regard. Still, the last thing we need is Aurors coming to haul you off to Azkaban for cursing Ron.

Speaking of the Weasleys, I've been exchanging letters with Ginny all summer. She seems to be doing better than she was at the end of term, though she still won't tell me what was bothering her. Do you

have any idea? I don't mean to imply I think she tells you more than she tells me, although that is possible, but I'm just concerned for our mutual friend.

Have you gotten your letter yet? I noticed that in addition to textbooks (the DADA books seem quite intense; I wonder who our new teacher is?) that we're supposed to bring dress robes. I haven't heard of any formal occasions during our time at Hogwarts; so I'm wondering if something is going on this year. Some kind of special event? It should be interesting, whatever it is.

Dad's in a panic trying to find everything right now, so I'll have to cut this short. We're going to spend the last week of our trip in Paris, and we'll get to see the remains of the Bastille. What interesting is that in order to make sure that wizards understand their role in French history, there are markers and plaques at the sites that only magical people can see. I've had to dictate the contents to my parents, which has gotten me some strange looks.

Hope to see you soon.

Love,

Hermione

Harry smiled as he read the letter. He could easily imagine Hermione's voice saying every word. Her letters tended to be like this; more of a stream of consciousness than a thought-out piece of writing. Ginny's letters were either completed in several sittings or subject to a lot of thought before quill hit parchment.

Harry's thoughts were interrupted by a loud crash from the living room and a series of un-lady-like curses. *Tonks*.

Daphne looked up in surprise. "I wonder what she's doing here," she said, obviously coming to the same conclusion as her ward. Harry got up and went to meet his friend. She was sprawled on the carpet, her face red with embarrassment. Tonks sported bright blue hair today with green eyes a shade or two lighter than Harry's. She smiled lazily at him as he entered. "Wotcher, Harry. Mind giving me a hand?"

Harry moved over to her and extended a hand. She pulled herself upright and dusted off her robes. She grinned at him, and Harry felt his own face taking the same expression. Tonks's grin was literally contagious. "I've got some good news for you," she said in a sing-song voice.

Harry refused to be baited, and stayed silent. Then she hit him in the arm. "OW!"

"Wuss," she said, "You're no fun," she pouted. "Alright, fine. You, Daphne, Mum, and me are going to the Quidditch World Cup."

That got Harry's attention. He gaped at her. "Are you serious? You got tickets?"

"Rank has its privileges," she told him. "She's Scrimgeour's secretary now, and he was given five tickets as a courtesy, but he's way too busy for that. He's a big Quidditch fan, actually, loves the Magpies, but like I said, he's not going to be able to go."

Harry had been following professional Quidditch all summer, through the newspaper and listening to the occasional game on the Wizarding Wireless Network. He didn't really have a team, so he supported Ginny's favorite, the Hollyhead Harpies. He knew that on the international stage, Bulgaria and Ireland would be the two teams in the final. The Bulgarian team wasn't remarkable as a whole, but their Seeker was the best in the world. Viktor Krum was a phenom, a wunderkind, a seventeen-year old physical specimen with unheard of reflexes and Quidditch instincts. What made him even more amazing was that he was still a student, a 7th year at Durmstrang. He was known to have a cold and unfriendly demeanor, but his focus and dedication on the pitch was unquestioned. Ireland's team wasn't too bad, either. Aiden Lynch was a fine Seeker, a veteran of many international tournaments, but the highlight of the Irish team were its three Chasers. Troy, Mullet and Moran were skilled players in their own right, but what set them apart was that they had tremendous chemistry, almost to the point of being to predict improvisations and deviations from the playbook.

"I can't wait," he said, letting some of the excitement he felt into his voice.

"Wait for what?" Daphne's voice asked from behind him.

"Barring any unforeseen calamities, the three of us, Hermione, and Mum are going to the Quidditch World Cup," he told her.

Daphne seemed genuinely surprised. "Andi's good at getting what she wants," she remarked. "I'm sure we'll all have a very good time. It will be good to get our minds off of everything that's going on. When does the World Cup begin?"

"In about a week," Tonks answered. "You'll owl Hermione?" she asked Harry. He nodded.

"Great. Maybe we'll run into one of those Seekers and have Harry show them a few things about handling a broom." Harry blushed, embarrassed. He knew that he was a great Seeker, and displayed some of the same instincts and feel that had made Krum a rising star, but he simply wasn't on the same level. In addition, Quidditch would never be anything but a diversion. He certainly wouldn't be able to make a career out of it.

Plus, no matter how famous he was, he doubted that Krum would want to associate much with him. Harry's star had faded, as was inevitable when all of his accomplishments and failures took place at Hogwarts, where surprisingly little news made it back to the students' parents. And *he* didn't want *that kind* of publicity; the kind that made it into Rita Skeeter's columns.

"So, Harry, what have you been learning recently? Last time I was here, you were still working with the Burning Curse. I've actually got a new one you might want to learn. A bit nasty, mind you, and borderline Dark," Tonks said, snapping him out of his daze.

"What is it?" he asked. He noticed that Daphne had slipped away.

"S' called the Fire Whip Curse. Quite literally, it makes a long tendril of fire sprout out of your wand. It's actually tangible, and it's capable of doing physical damage outside of the fire itself. You can imagine the uses if you are properly trained. Mad Eye taught me that one. Actually took me aside and gave me a little private lesson. He's creepy, that one, but I don't think they've ever made one better."

Harry had heard the story of Alastor Moody. He'd been orphaned early in life, his parents killed in a firefight between a notorious criminal gang of Dark Wizards, and from that moment forward had been determined to join the Aurors and avenge his parents. He'd been one of the best students in the history of both Hogwarts and the Auror School. When Daphne had been coming up, it was Moody that they had compared her to. Quite appropriately, as Moody had personally taught Daphne most of what she knew about combat survival. Alastor Moody had retired two years after the end of the war, but apparently he still tried to pass on the tricks of the trade. "I doubt they have," Harry replied. "Can you show me?"

"We'll need more room than this," she said, waving at the entrance hall. "Or at least, we need to be surrounded with less valuable objects. I don't want to destroy half of the Dressler family's heirlooms."

"No, I think we'll skip that," Harry agreed.

They proceeded quickly to Daphne's training space, a large, multi-purpose room that could be used as a target range, a gymnasium, or a combat simulator, depending on what they needed. Daphne had left the door unlocked, as Harry had free access whenever he wanted it. They stopped in the middle of the floor, and Tonka gestured for him to stay where he was as she moved above five meters away from him. She drew her wand with a flourish, drew it back, and then snapped it forward, shouting, "*Flagro Flagello*."

There was a sharp hiss, and a long, thin tendril of fire shot out of the end of Tonks's wand, ending up about two meters long. She whirled it around with spectacular effects, and then lashed down at the floor. The heavy duty material was durable enough to partially absorb the blow, but it cut a deep groove with singed edges. Harry imagined it might split a person right down the middle. Tonks grinned at him. "Like it?"

He stared at the slash in the floor, then back at Tonks. "Wow."

She laughed. "That's what *I* said, and mind you, his was *much* bigger than mine. I'm still learning how to sustain the power." As she spoke, the whip rapidly drew back into her wand, disappearing with a loud *crack*. "See what I mean?"

Harry nodded. He had to admit he was anxious to try it out. "What's the mental process?" he asked. He presumed that such an advanced spell involved special focus and concentration in addition to the wand movements and incantation. He was right.

"It's basically visualization. There aren't many spells that require that, but this is one of them. You have to have an image of the whip in your mind. Don't close your eyes though, or it won't work. Moody wasn't real happy when I did that a few times."

"I can imagine, he told her. "When can we get started?"

Tonks laughed. "Aren't we in a hurry?"

You have no idea, Harry thought.

A/N: And so it begins.

Don't have much to say, except that you'll get a peek at Aiden in the next chapter.

Hope you liked the Fire Whip Curse. You'll be seeing it again.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter 1: Reunion

Inside the darkened drawing room of their manor in Cornwall, Daphne Greengrass watched her father, the only person in the world to whom she could say she felt genuine affection towards, compose a letter to the Boy-Who-Lived in the flickering light of a dying fire. She stood patiently just inside the doorway, completely silent and respectful, her hands hanging calmly at her sides. She was dressed conservatively, wearing a plain black robe made of inexpensive but durable fabric. She wore a pair of small silver earrings, the only indication that her family was even modestly wealthy. Her hair was tied into a single ponytail flowing down her back.

From the time she had been very young, Daphne had been completely disinterested in flaunting her family's wealth and affluence. On the other hand, she'd been fascinated by the machinations and conspiracies that swirled around the minds of the most eminent purebloods, as well as Wizarding politics in general. Her mother, Lysa, had been much more into *that sort of thing*. That was not to say she had been unintelligent - she doubted her father would have married her if she hadn't been. But she had, according to her father's accounts, been concerned with how she was perceived and this left her a bit insecure. And she hadn't exactly been frugal, either, spending a sizable portion of her family's fortune. Daphne supposed it had run in the family; her father was stunned by the amount of money that the Carlsons had spent on their daughter's wedding.

Daphne had always had a gift — if it could be called that — for not showing emotion even when she was upset or worried. But that was not the reason she could think or speak of her mother and sister without breaking down. The truth was she'd never *known* either of them. She didn't *remember* either of them. She hadn't experienced the loss of them in person; she'd been hidden on the other side of the county. Not the slightest impression or trace of her mother remained. She might as well have not *had* a sister. She knew nothing of either of them, and so what *was* there to miss? What *was* there to grieve over?

Daphne had been pragmatic for as long as she could remember. She was also quite ambitious. She sought to someday head the

Pureblood Council and to be a force in the Ministry through her influence. She knew her cold personality could be unnerving, and used it to her full advantage. She'd completely baffled the Boy-Who-Lived, Harry Potter, in their first meeting of any length or consequence...well, there was that brief time she'd tested him to begin Third Year. She tested him because she sought to understand why her father, a brilliant man with a highly analytical mind, would have any interest in this half-blood pretender. Her father had in fact explained to her in great detail why Harry Potter had done absolutely *nothing* in bringing about the fall of the Dark Lord. Stranger still, Aiden had attributed it to the loyalty and valor of a common Muggle-born, Lilly Evans Potter. Daphne was amused by the fact that the pureblood community would be ever more shocked by the truth than that which was accepted as fact.

She heard the scratching of her father's quill stop, and the crinkle of parchment as her father examined the contents closely, searching for a misused word or an unclear statement. As usual, he found none. "Are you planning to stand there all day, my little Ice Queen?" he asked, using his annoyingly affectionate nickname for her. She might have liked it six years ago, but she'd learned a lot in that time.

"As long as it takes for you to complete it," she responded, not moving. "I still fail to understand why you are taking such a risk at all. Power is nothing without the skill to wield it."

"You doubt his ability?" he asked, his voice betraying incredulity. Wherever she had gotten her ice cold demeanor, it had *not* been from him. Father and daughter were as different as could be. Yet she loved him dearly, and felt close to no one but him.

"I doubt many things," she responded cryptically. "Not the least of which is his ability to lead the wizarding world in the coming war. I'm still not convinced we might not be safer leaving the country entirely. We have places to go on the continent. Should the war spread that far, we will have time to plan."

"My family has never run from danger, my fair daughter, and they will not start now," he replied, sounding a bit angry at the suggestion. "What you suggest is cowardice. I will stand alongside Potter, against

the monster that destroyed my family, and you will stand beside me, no matter *how* reluctant and skeptical you may now be. He will be something *special*, Daphne, something *fantastic*. He will be mentioned in the same breadth as Dumbledore and the Dark Lord himself. I have never been as sure of something as I am of this."

"So you say," Daphne said, noncommittally. Personally, she wasn't sure that she believed that the way that had gone into hiding, separating in the process, had been very different. "May I see the letter?"

"Of course," Aiden replied. He offered it to her, and she walked into the room and approached the desk, taking the proffered letter. It was typical Aiden Greengrass; simple, short, and concise.

Mr. Potter,

You know me only through an indirect source, namely, my daughter Daphne. I have followed your progress since you arrived at Hogwarts, and while many see weakness or unremarkable skill, I see great potential and mental fortitude. You have sustained more damage to your body and psyche than a typical wizard could be expected to bear, and you have emerged stronger for it.

I do not write to you to offer an alliance or any manner of pledge of loyalty, but I still wish to meet you in person. I understand that you have obtained tickets to the Quidditch World Cup, and will doubtless be attending. I would propose a meeting between myself, my daughter, you, and your guardian. I swear to you that I intend no harm. I will await your response.

Aiden, Patriarch of the Family Greengrass

"So?" her father asked, sounding anxious for her input. She considered for a moment.

"I don't care for Quidditch," she said, "but I see the purpose in offering to meet in such a neutral and public place. It may assure Potter's guardian."

"That's beside the point," he insisted. "What do you believe will be his reaction?"

"He'll be awestruck, and enthusiastic," she said, with a mild distaste.

Aiden smiled. "Excellent."

Harry grinned as Hermione raced towards him and pulled him into a crushing embrace. He returned it with equal vigor. She held on for a few more seconds then let go. "It's so good to see you again," she said.

"You too," he replied. "How was the rest of your vacation in France?"

"Excellent," she answered truthfully. "Paris was fascinating; there's a lot of wizarding history I didn't know about. We were given a tour guide for all of the historic sites in the city by the French Ministry...in exchange for a fee, of course, but it was worth it. You've got to see it for yourself sometime."

Harry nodded, taking in the sight before him. He stood a few feet outside Daphne's tent, and as far as the eye could see, the ground of the moor was covered with densely-packed collections of wizarding dwellings. The area where they had been assigned was right in the middle of the most fanatical of the Ireland fans, and *everything* was emerald green. He, Daphne, Tonks, and Andromeda had arrived the previous night, cursing the Ministry idiot that had scheduled their Portkey to depart at *four in the morning*. Tonks's language had been remarkably colorful, yet she never used the same disparaging remark twice. It had been quite an aural display. He felt somewhat guilty for the whole thing; Tonks, Daphne, and Andromeda could Apparate, but in the name of public safety, the Ministry had issued a statement declaring that Side-Along Apparition to the World Cup site would not be allowed unless all participants were of age. Hence, they had to find the nearest portkey.

Still, they had arrived in one piece, even if they, with the exception of Daphne, had collapsed on their beds as soon as they set up the two tents. One thing that Harry had noticed was that the ground of the moor was not entirely level; their tents were located on a slightly

elevated ridge, and there was a matching one a few thousand meters away.

Daphne had stayed awake and didn't appear fatigued in the least when he'd seen her perusing the *Daily Prophet*. Harry had dressed, eaten a quick breakfast, and stepped out of his tent to see Hermione looking down over the ridge at the mass of tents at its base. He'd called over to her, and here they were. "Where have you been staying?" he asked. He knew that Hermione's travel arrangements had been taken care of, but he didn't know by whom.

"Oh, she's just been enjoying the hospitality of the Weasley family," a familiar voice said. Harry was pleasantly surprised. He hadn't heard the Weasleys (specifically Ginny) had tickets. He'd considered telling her about the trip, but decided against it, as he didn't want to make her jealous. He was certain that her overprotective mother wouldn't let her come alone, which was the reason he'd always planned on giving Hermione the fifth ticket.

"We've been excellent hosts," a second, almost identical voice added. Harry looked past his friend to see Fred and George Weasley standing at the top of the path leading to the crest of the ridge. Atop the ridge, in addition to his and the Tonks' tents, were about sixty other structures. The elevated ground was probably about a meter taller than the surrounding area at its highest point.

Harry could see part of the Quidditch Stadium that had been dug into the earth sticking out in the distance. Lyons Stadium, so named for one of the greatest Professional Quidditch players in history, a legendary Keeper that played for England, had hosted the last fourteen World Cup finals.

"Except for the *surprise* I encountered this morning," Hermione told them, sounding quite irritated. She'd obviously been the victim of one of the Weasley twins' pranks.

"Now Hermione, that wasn't *our* fault," George told her.

"That bucket was *meant* for Ickle Ronniekins," Fred continued.

"It's not *our* fault you are an early riser, and Ronniekins sleeps like the dead."

Hermione harrumphed, moving closer to Harry. Harry had trouble keeping in his laughter. It wasn't nearly as difficult when then the aforementioned Ron Weasley appeared over the crest of the ridge, followed by his sister. He glared at Harry as Ginny rushed forward, squeezing him in a warm embrace. Harry kept his eyes on the youngest male Weasley, as if he was trying to burn a pair of holes through the Gryffindor.

Ginny noticed this, and let go. She looked at both of them. "Do you two *really* have to get into this now?"

"What are *you* doing here?" Ron demanded, his cheeks flushed with anger. "Can't I have just *one* moment without being reminded of your existence?"

"Welcome to our hilltop fortress, Weasley," Harry replied coolly. "I suggest you leave. Or I'll set Tonks on you."

"Set me on who?" a sleep sounding voice asked from the other tent. Brown eyes half closed, her purple hair in disarray, Tonks stumbled out of the structure, looking like she might fall flat on her face any moment. Ron stared at her as if she was the strangest thing he'd ever seen. Fred and George noticed.

"It's not nice to stare, Ronniekins," Fred scolded him.

"Yeah, Hermione might get the idea you don't like her anymore," George added, an evil grin spreading on his face. Both Hermione and Ron turned red as radishes for different reasons. Ron was angry and embarrassed. Hermione was outraged.

"You little *scum*," she hissed. "Keep your bloody eyes off of me. I'll just as soon shove you off a cliff." Harry had to admit that he'd never seen her speak so nastily. It was amusing to watch Ron's reaction.

Ron turned and stomped off down the hill. Harry kept his eyes on him the entire way. Then he turned on Fred and George. "You really didn't need to do that. I don't like him, but I didn't want to escalate this

whole bloody thing all over again. I barely saw him last year, and I must admit it was a nice change.”

The twins shrugged. “Ginny, come with us. Dad wants us to get some firewood. Then we’ll get to watch him play around with matches.”

Ginny looked annoyed, but followed them down the hill. Harry turned to see Tonks leaning against the tent, looking confused. She grinned lopsidedly at Hermione. “That was interestin’,” she said, yawning.

“Maybe you ought to get dressed,” Hermione advised. Harry now noticed that Tonks was wearing a wrinkled nightgown.

“Sounds like a good idea,” she murmured, then disappeared back inside the tent.

Hermione giggled as she disappeared. Tonks was always something remarkable to behold in the morning. Her personality was completely reversed. “So how have you been?” she asked. “What have you been doing this summer? You wouldn’t tell me much about your training,” she pointed out.

“I told you a few things,” Harry replied defensively. “I told you some of the spells we were working on, and that I’ve been trying to improve my physical fitness and stamina.”

“I’ve noticed,” Hermione replied, grinning evilly. Harry blushed. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of, you know. Far from it.”

“*You aren’t helping,*” he gritted out. “The last thing I need is a bunch of girls fawning over me. I’ve got a lot to do this year,” he explained. He hadn’t really considered the attention that his training with Daphne was likely to garner with Hogwarts’ female population. He seemed to have gotten over his brief, still baffling fascination with Ginny, but that didn’t mean the subject of girls was completely absent from his mind. He was a teenager after all.

Hermione laughed. “You know, *that* is something most boys wouldn’t exactly mind, but I see your point. Would you like Ginny and I to act as your bodyguards and fend off any unwanted female attention.”

“As if *that* would help,” Harry responded, irritated.

Hermione smiled. “No, it probably wouldn’t. But it *would* be quite amusing. Especially Ron’s reaction to it.”

Harry grimaced. “How lenient do you suppose Dumbledore would be if I used a Dark curse on him?”

Hermione frowned, and then realized he was joking. “That *isn’t* particularly funny.”

“Forget it,” Harry said firmly. He didn’t want to talk about any of that right now. He was hoping that this trip to the Quidditch World Cup would allow him to do two things. First, he hoped to get away from all thoughts of Hogwarts and his training. Second, he would have a chance to make personal contact with one of the purebloods he sought to ally with. Realizing that Hermione was staring at him, he changed the subject. “So, you wanted to know what I’ve been learning?”

Hermione nodded. “I realize that you won’t be able to effectively teach it all, but I’d like to at least know what spells you learned so that I can research them on my own.”

Harry nodded. “Well, just to name a few, the Bludgeoning Curse and the Flinging Hex. Daphne’s also been teaching me a lot about defensive magic and tactics to best employ it. That’s really been what most of my training has focused on: learning to deflect various spells and to use your own athleticism and agility to your advantage in a duel.”

Hermione nodded, looking interested. “I have read about a few different tactics, but the literature is really quite limited. There isn’t much in the Hogwarts Library outside the Restricted Section - for good reason, I might add — that deals with the more advanced parts of dueling. Still, I’d think that even the most detailed book pales in comparison with being taught it by a legend like Daphne.”

Harry nodded, staring out over the tents and the wizards that were starting to emerge from them, somewhat distracted. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this year, Hermione,” he told her. She frowned.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

Harry shrugged. “I just have a strange feeling that something troubling is happening right now. The combination of the strange dreams and just these feelings of Voldemort gaining strength...” he sighed. “I really can’t explain it. I just *know*.”

Hermione looked concerned. “Are you alright?” he asked her.

She bit her lip, a decidedly nervous habit. “I just...well, I’ve read a lot about the war, and...well, it wasn’t pretty. I...I mean, we’re just so young and...” She appeared lost for words, but Harry understood.

“You’re afraid. Afraid that there might be another war, that the Wizarding world will be devastated and families will be destroyed all over again. And you fear that it’s coming soon, and you feel helpless to stop it,” Harry said.

She nodded. “Exactly...I just don’t feel ready for that sort of thing. You’ve got to understand...I know that wizarding children grow up faster and all of that, but the concept of fighting a war as a young teenager is incomprehensible for most Muggle children my age, even though quite a bit of soldiers in the armed forces are eighteen or nineteen. The last war we fought as a country — well, besides the Falklands — was fought by our grandfathers. We’re used to living at peace, and thinking that fighting and everything else is a thing of the past. And if the burning in your scar and the things you’ve been experiencing are the harbinger of a coming war then, well...I don’t know how to handle that,” she said, sounding almost ashamed of herself.

Harry stared at her. “Do you really think we’re not all in the same boat? Yes, maybe I’ve had more personal experience with what war can do to people, and I lost my parents because of it, but I’ve as little experience in large-scale conflict as you have. We’ve fought together, but that just isn’t the same thing. *Nothing* can prepare you for the horrors of warfare.” He swallowed, trying to keep his voice strong. “In a way we should be grateful for everything we’ve already been through. Can you imagine...Blaise, for example, thrown into that kind of situation? He’s been raised as a pureblood, but he’s as naïve as Ginny when it come to a lot of things.”

"I wouldn't be so sure about Ginny," Hermione said, interrupting him. "She's changed after what happened in the Forest. I don't know how, but she lost something there. Her innocence, maybe."

"Maybe," Harry repeated. "She won't talk to me about it. I get the feeling that I've done something wrong, but I can't figure out what it is. I could tell she was angry at me; she was broadcasting it all over the place, and a person with as much power as I have is more sensitive to that kind of thing...but she was mad at me before she realized I could read her emotions."

Hermione shook her head. "I can't help you. She told me what Amycus did to her, and said she was having nightmares about that...completely understandable, of course," she added. "But I'm not sure I believe her."

"You aren't?"

She shook her head again. "She's hiding something from me, and she feels guilty about it. I don't need extraordinary amounts of magical power to tell me that. It's obvious from the tone of her voice, her constant attempts to change the subject, and the way she gets angry with me when I push her on it. She wrote a rather scathing letter to me, but no sooner had I read it when another letter arrived, apologizing for the first."

Harry shrugged helplessly. "Where did the Twins take her again?"

"To get firewood," Hermione reminded him. "Technically, the wizards here aren't supposed to use magic, so as not to alert the Muggle caretaker of the land. The problem is that no one listens, and they've had to Oblivate him so many times that I'm not sure he knows which way is up anymore. Still, Mr. Weasley wants to do things the 'Muggle' way, which involves lighting a fire to cook meals. I have some doubts as to his capabilities with matches, however. He'll probably set *himself* on fire."

"Ginny said that he was fascinated by all things Muggle."

"Oh, trust me, he is," she said, sounding exasperated. "The first thing he asked me after finding out I was Muggle-born was: 'What is the

function of a rubber duck?’ As you can imagine, I wasn’t exactly expecting that.”

Harry grinned. “What did you tell him?”

Hermione sighed. “Well, Ginny managed to rescue me at that point, so I never actually got around to telling him. I did explain to him the function of a stapler...and what Guy Fawkes Day is.”

Harry nodded. “I had noticed that wizards don’t celebrate it.”

“It’s because it was one of the few events in history where absolutely no wizards were involved. None of the English kings were wizards, because the foundations what would become the English Ministry of Magic were already in place. England’s ministry has existed longer than any other country’s,” she explained.

“I know that,” Harry told her, “but that explains a lot. Daphne’s always thought the entire holiday was completely backward...my Mum’s family celebrated it, and she and Daphne apparently had a few arguments over the senselessness of the whole thing.”

Hermione frowned. “I thought Daphne didn’t talk much about her school days with you.”

“She doesn’t. Remus told me that,” Harry clarified. “I learned a lot more about my parents from him than I have from Daphne. It’s not her fault; the subject is just very painful for her to talk about. I respect that and don’t push her.”

“Probably a good idea,” Hermione mumbled under her breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” she said, convincingly. Harry let the subject drop. He heard movement from behind them, and Tonks peeked out of her tent.

“You two still talking?” she asked, looking considerably better than she had been, though a bit more irritated.

“Yes. Why?” Hermione asked.

“Because you’ve been standing there for nearly half an hour,” Tonks told them. “And I’m trying to study something.”

“I thought you had graduated already,” Harry said. “Why are you studying *now*?”

“Because I’m trying to be a better Auror, you airhead,” she said, none-too-playfully. “Mum’s not going to support me *forever*, and recent graduates don’t get paid much. I’ll have to earn the rank of commander, but I can at least get myself involved regularly in Auror raids if I pass some tests. Of course, I forgot that I’d scheduled one the *day we get back*, so I’m a *bit* peeved right now.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have forgotten,” Hermione chastised. Tonks glared at her. “Fine, we’ll go somewhere else,” Hermione told her, gesturing down the ridge. “C’mon Harry.”

Tonks impatiently disappeared back inside the tent, cursing (not at them, but at her own forgetfulness.) Harry and Hermione made their way down the ridge into the mass of activity. Almost all of the tents were a vibrant emerald green, or at the very least they had Irish banners or flags. Several had leprechaun ornaments hanging from them. Wizards mulled about, talking and laughing loudly. Many of them were drinking some alcoholic beverage or another. It didn’t seem to matter that it was barely lunchtime; it was the day of the Quidditch World Cup after all. Harry didn’t recognize any faces, but he did see several people with flaming red hair a little ways off. He and Hermione made their way towards the Weasley tent.

Sure enough, tall, balding Arthur Weasley was currently seated beside a stack of small logs, staring determinedly at a match that was apparently refusing to light. Harry noticed two redheaded men he’d never seen before. One was tall and well built, with his long hair pulled into a ponytail and a dragon fang earring hanging from his right ear. The other was shorter and stocky like Fred and George. His skin was considerably darker than the rest of the Weasleys. “That’s Bill and Charlie,” Hermione whispered by way of explanation. Harry nodded. He knew of the two eldest Weasleys by reputation, though he’d never met them in person.

Arthur looked up at them as they approached. "Hello Hermione...and you must be Harry Potter," he said cheerfully. "It's nice to meet you. Ginny's told us quite a bit about you."

"Dad!" Ginny yelled from inside the tent. She stuck her head out and smiled when she saw them standing there, then came out to join them. "Are you still trying to figure out how to light that thing? It's a bloody waste of time if you ask me."

"Mind your language, Ginny," Arthur told her firmly. "Just because your mother is not here doesn't mean you can do whatever you want...and I'm trying to set an example and obey the Ministry law."

"Whatever you say," Ginny told him, rolling her eyes. "Why don't you ask Hermione for help?"

Arthur brightened at that suggestion. "A brilliant idea! Hermione, could you show me how to do this?"

Hermione nodded politely and bent down to help him. In no time at all, they managed to light the fire, which was fortunately surrounded by nothing but earth, probably at Hermione's suggestion. Even if Mr. Weasley hadn't set himself on fire, setting the grass ablaze really wasn't that much better.

While they lit the fire, Ginny moved closer to Harry. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming?" she demanded, sounding a bit hurt.

Harry sighed. "I'm sorry. I just...well, I just didn't want to upset you because I didn't know that *you* were coming. I acted on the assumption that your mother probably wouldn't let you come without the rest of your family."

Ginny nodded, looking placated. "That makes sense...I'm sorry for jumping to conclusions."

"Don't be," Harry told her. "I understand that you sometimes feel left out, and I do try to change that."

"It's not your fault," she told him. "You and Hermione were simply friends before I was even in the picture. The two of you are like brother and sister. I can deal with just being the best friend."

"I really wish you wouldn't think of it that way," Harry said. "I don't want to feel like you are *settling* for something less."

"I'm not..." she stopped as Hermione walked back over to join them. Arthur Weasley seemed to have the fire under control, and then went into the tent, only to re-appear with a sack of sandwiches. Hermione looked quite irritated. Ginny was the only one that spoke, though. "Dad, why did you just go through all of that if Mum already made our lunches?"

"Because it's part of the *experience*!" he exclaimed. "Besides, I'm sure we'll need the fire at some point. But we all know that my cooking would never match the quality of your mother's sandwiches."

"Your cooking is pretty awful, Dad," Bill interrupted. He glanced at Harry. "So you're Harry Potter?"

"No, he's not. He just happens to look like him. And be friends with his friends. And..." Ginny was about to go on when Bill raised his hands in surrender.

"Alright, alright, I get the picture. He stepped over to them and held out his hand. Bill Weasley." Harry took it and shook. His grip was firm but not overly so. He seemed rather measured in his responses. Not suspicious so much as merely thoughtful. He hoped that the eldest Weasley boy would warm to him eventually.

Charlie also came over. "Charlie Weasley," he said. His idea of a handshake was basically to crush the other person's hand. "Ginny's told me quite a bit about you. Slytherin, eh?"

Harry nodded. "It's nice to meet you. How's Norbert?" he asked, abruptly remembering the incident from First Year. Hermione rolled her eyes, and Mr. Weasley looked over curiously.

"Who's Norbert?"

"A dragon," Charlie responded. Hermione started. "He was a particularly troublesome one that I wrote Ron about. I guess you must have heard about him that way. He's fine, by the way, nice and healthy. He'll be finding a mate soon, I reckon. He's also the biggest Ridgeback I've ever seen."

Harry smiled, though he didn't comment that Hagrid would be overjoyed to hear this news. Bill wasn't asking any questions, so Harry assumed that he'd been told by one of his siblings.

"Well, now that you've gotten to know one another, would you care to join us for lunch? By the way, where is your guardian?"

"To the first, we'd be delighted," Harry told him. "As for the second...I'm not sure. She left before I woke up and I haven't seen her since. Actually, I'm not sure what happened to Andromeda either."

"Sorry?" Arthur asked.

"Andromeda Tonks. She's a friend of Daphne's, and her daughter, Nymphadora, is a friend of ours."

Arthur nodded, obviously recognizing the name. "Alright. Here, have a sandwich. Ron!" he called back into the tent. From the way he projected his voice, Harry guessed that the tent was magical, just like the one he slept in, and the space inside was considerably greater than it appeared from the outside. The summoned Weasley stuck his head out.

"What do you...what are *you* doing here?" he demanded. "It's bad enough that I have to be on the same *moor* as you!"

"Trust me, the feeling is mutual," Harry replied. Bill and Charlie looked at the two of them, obviously not understanding the source of the animosity between them. Harry was rapidly being reminded of exactly why he hated Ginny's brother.

Arthur cleared his throat. "Now, boys, we'll have none of that. Come out, Ron, and have some lunch with us. Harry and Hermione are here

as Ginny's friends. If you'd care to bring a few of your own we wouldn't mind. I think I saw Seamus's father earlier."

Ron evidently didn't think it worth the effort, as he stalked out of the tent and sat down roughly on the ground, glaring at Harry from behind his bangs. Harry ignored him, striking up light conversation with Hermione and Ginny as he ate his roast beef sandwich. It was quite good, and Harry remembered Mrs. Weasley was supposed to be a superb cook. They talked about Hermione's trip to France, with Bill Weasley occasionally making a few interesting comments about things she had seen. He was somewhat skeptical of a few things that the markers had told her. The twins were engrossed in an energetic conversation with Charlie, while Arthur would make a comment or ask a question every so often. Ron, along with Percy, ate in silence.

The topic of the conversation turned to Quidditch. Ginny planned to actively support the Irish team, while Harry preferred to simply watch the game as an objective Quidditch fan. Hermione wasn't able to contribute much, though she did know a bit more about the dangerous game than Harry had thought. Ginny had been extolling the virtues of the Irish team and their trio of Chasers when Charlie began praising Krum.

"He's not the best there's ever been, but that's basically just because he's so young and hasn't been in the league very long. It's almost unprecedented for a wizard to be playing professionally in any capacity while he's still in school," the dragon-wrangling Weasley brother said.

"I haven't been following the game for that long, but everything I've read about him tells me exactly that," Harry commented. "His instincts are incredible. It's as if he was literally born to play Quidditch."

"How do *you* know anything about him, Potter? It's not like you've ever been to a Quidditch game. I doubt you even know what a Wronski Feint is," Ron rudely cut in, glaring at his rival.

"It's a complicated, near-suicidal deceptive maneuver designed to trick a pursuing Seeker into flying straight into the ground." Harry grinned. "It's pretty much a more advanced version of what I do to

you whenever Slytherin plays Gryffindor. How are your teeth, Weasley?"

"*Harry...*" Hermione warned.

Ron turned bright red. He'd had his fair share of encounters with the turf when Harry was his opposite number. But this wasn't embarrassment so much as seething rage. "*You little, conniving-*"

"*Slyth erin?*" Harry suggested, laughing. "I'm *proud* of my House, Weasel."

"*That's enough,*" Arthur snapped, clearly irritated. I won't have you two bickering back and forth and ruining this occasion. Ron, we were very fortunate to get these tickets, as we never could have afforded them and I want to enjoy every minute of it. You and Harry can bicker when you get back to school."

Harry felt somewhat guilty now for spoiling this generous offer by the Weasley family. "I'm sorry, Mr. Weasley," he said, honestly. "I didn't mean to let my personal difference ruin this whole thing for you. I might add that we were also fortunate to acquire tickets."

Arthur softened considerably. "That's quite all right, Harry, but please, no more fighting between you two. Let's enjoy what we have."

Harry ate the rest of his meal with his friends and then the three of them went off to find out what was going on, conversing briefly with a few friends who were also attending, including Tracey Davis. Harry kept an eye out for Daphne, but he never saw his guardian.

He did eventually find Daphne, though she only re-entered their tent an hour before they were going to leave for the Quidditch Final. She looked somewhat stressed and concerned. "I spoke with Daphne Greengrass," she told him. "She and her father will meet us an hour after the end of the game, at the western edge of the moor."

Harry nodded. "How should I dress?" he asked. He was aware that he might not have time to change before their meeting, and he didn't want to show up for a crucial meeting with a leader in the pureblood

community wearing his Viktor Krum jersey. Ginny had insisted that he buy it, and he'd given in. He had to admit he was fascinated by the Bulgarian Seeker, and had wondered what he was really like in person. He was under an entirely different kind of stress. At least Harry could hide in the shadows to a certain extent. Krum was expected to perform at the highest level when he hadn't even taken his N.E.W.T.s.

Daphne thought for a moment. "Wear some black robes under that jersey and whatever else you are planning to bring. I'll shrink whatever it is and keep it out of sight. Simply be presentable."

Harry nodded. "Where were you this afternoon?"

Daphne shook her head. "It doesn't concern you," she said firmly.

Harry frowned. Rarely did Daphne refuse to tell him something. Considering that the last major secret she'd hidden from him was the Prophecy, he was understandably anxious. But it didn't appear as though he could do anything about it.

A/N: Unlike previous books, I'm jumping right into the action. I will do a long, detailed description of the Quidditch World Cup. I intend to change quite a few things, as it would be quite dull to simply do exactly what JKR did (which I didn't like that much anyway). The outcome will stay the same, but let's say Krum's confidence will be taken down a notch.

Harry's absentmindedness concerning Ginny can be contributed to his creator's absentmindedness. Namely, me. I hope my explanation is satisfactory.

Where Daphne was is important. Or more importantly, who she was with...

As you can imagine, the Death Eater Reunion is going to be staged differently. Daphne gives them nightmares for a reason.

I managed to fit in a bit of sisterly teasing by Hermione...before dragging both of them down into fears and philosophical questions about war. And concerns about Ginny. That's me.

Ron and Harry, and for that matter, Harry and Draco, will interact more often than they did last book. There simply weren't that many spots for it.

Strangely enough, by book four of this series, Arthur and Harry haven't actually met one another.

Tonks's behavior in the chapter is based on the morning behavior of one of my friends. She's a bit more scholarly than the Mistress of Madness, but it is still eerily similiar.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter 2: Terror

Their journey to the top box of the stadium was marred by only one thing: the presence of Draco, Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy. Daphne and the Malfoy patriarch sneered at one another as they passed, their past conflicts clearly not forgotten. Draco avoided Harry's eyes, though he did make a comment about Ron's Chudley Canons jersey, to which the Gryffindor responded with a rather rude comment about his family's genetic makeup. Lucius had held his son back with his cane while Bill restrained Ron.

Harry sat next to Hermione and two seats away from Ginny, with Daphne sitting the closest to the Malfoys, her wand clearly visible, lying in her lap, as if daring *anyone* to make trouble. Andromeda sat next to her. The Weasleys were scattered up and down the box, though Bill, Charlie, Fred and George sat together. Tonks, interestingly, seated herself next to Charlie rather than Harry and Hermione. It occurred to Harry that anything as docile as even a Striking Curse could send the victim plunging to their death. Daphne most likely knew that too. Ludo Bagman, whom Daphne thought foolish and incompetent, was sitting a bit farther away, near the Malfoys, carrying on an awkward conversation with a Bulgarian diplomat. The language difficulties were obvious.

Something vaguely familiar caught Harry's eye from a row above him, the very last row of the stadium. A pink-skinned house-elf sat there, hands covering its eyes, quaking with fright. Hermione noticed Harry's distraction and glanced behind her as well. "Are you alright?" she asked softly, in a sympathetic voice.

The elf removed its hands, and stared at her in confusion. Any question Harry had had about its gender was answered by her high-pitched response, "Why is the girl asking about Winky?" she asked, more to herself than to Hermione.

"Because you look frightened," Hermione told her. "Are you waiting for someone? Whose seat is that next to you?"

Winky started as though shocked. "Tis....'tis Mr. Crouch's seat, Miss," she said shakily.

Percy's head whipped around. "*You* are Mr. Crouch's elf?" he demanded. "Where is your master?"

"Who is you?" Winky asked.

Percy stuck out his chest, even though still seated. "*I* am Mr. Crouch's personal assistant."

"You is Weatherby?" Winky asked. Ginny snorted.

Percy's cheeks reddened a bit, but he continued. "Where is your master?" he asked again.

Winky shook her head. "I is not knowing," she insisted. "Master is saying to Winky that Winky should come to the top box and save a seat for master. So that is what Winky is doing...Winky scared of heights, sir, but Winky is doing what her master told her to do."

Harry could feel Hermione's indignation growing. He'd explained quite clearly why house-elves were bound the way they were, and that they could not survive without being bound to a house. They also gained personal satisfaction through serving their masters. It still didn't stop Hermione from protesting what she considered unfair treatment. "Why doesn't he come *himself*?" she demanded. "He knows you don't like heights, and he still sends you out here. The game is going to start in ten minutes, and at this rate, he won't show up at all."

As Harry watched Winky, he saw a strange flicker of motion in the empty seat next to her. He focused on the spot where he'd seen the disruption, reaching out slightly with his magic. But he found nothing. Blinking, he returned to the conversation. Percy was now berating Hermione, telling her that she was an "ignorant, naïve little girl" and that "Mr. Crouch was a very busy man and sometimes had to designate minor tasks to his servants when he could not take care of them himself." Fred made a crack that his uptight brother should have been used instead of the elf, which Percy either ignored or didn't hear.

Hermione's cheeks were flushed now, and her brown eyes blazed with indignation and fury. If she wasn't careful, she might whip out her wand and reduce Percy to a pile of flaming ashes. Ginny laid a hand on her shoulder, whispering something. She relaxed slightly, and her

right hand came out onto her lap. Harry would bet a thousand galleons that it had been tightly gripping her wand seconds earlier.

Winky had basically tried to keep out of the entire conversation, staring straight ahead. Harry decided to leave it be. He absently glanced over at the Malfoys, and found that Lucius was staring straight at him. Daphne had noticed, and Lucius turned away as she picked up her wand from her lap and twirled it around for a second. Harry wasn't sure what to make of that.

The crowd was growing progressively louder as they awaited the opening whistle. Harry saw Ludo Bagman pull his wand from his robes and whisper a spell. He knew it was a Voice Magnifying Spell as Bagman's voice boomed, *"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the 131st Quidditch World Cup Final! As you know, for only the 18th time in history, the finalists are tied in points for the tournament, with 700 each!"*

The crowd roared lustily in response. The noise was deafening, and red and green towels, banners, and flags twirled around in a blur of color. Ron Weasley screamed something incomprehensible. "C'mon, get this thing started," Ginny growled, just loud enough for Harry to hear her. She wore a green Harpies jersey over her robes. The colors of her favorite team just happened to be the same as the colors of the Irish, which worked quite well. Hermione had a green hat and mittens on this chilly night, and Harry wore the Krum jersey he'd purchased earlier. He also dug his Omniculars out of his robes. The wonderful little device would allow him to break down particularly special plays in slow motion. Daphne had purchased it for him as a late birthday gift, adding it to the rare collection of dueling manuals she'd paid a near-fortune for at a second-hand book store. Harry figured that Daphne might have bought them for herself anyway, but he also appreciated the gesture. They contained different tactics and approaches than those taught in the more modern manuals or the ones that Daphne used and taught to him. Obviously, she realized that her style of dueling, which involved a great deal of rapid physical movement and agility, the second of which Harry wasn't that gifted with when he wasn't on a broom, might not work so well for him.

“And now.....THE IRISH NATIONAL TEAM!” Bagman cried. The noise level, if it was possible, increased. Seven emerald-green-robed figures burst out of an opening in the north side of the stadium. Bagman cried each of their names. *“Chaser Troy! Chaser Moran! Chaser Mullet! Keeper Ryan! Beater Connolly! Beater Quigley! Aaaaaaand...SEEKER LYNCH!!!!!!”*

The Irish fans in the crowd (which Harry judged to be about two-thirds of the people present) roared with each name, but they yelled, clapped, and whistled the loudest when the Seeker's name was announced. Harry turned to Ginny, seeking an explanation. “He pulled out a last second win against Luxembourg by tricking their other Seeker. Considering that the Luxembourg National Team beat both England and Scotland, and you get this reaction,” she said, trying to be heard over the roar of the crowd. Harry nodded, indicating he'd heard her.

There were no reserves in World Cup Quidditch. If a player could not be attended to and put back in the game by the team's mediwizards, you had to play down one man. If you lost your Seeker, the impetus was on the Chasers to score as much as they could, hoping to build up a lead greater than 150 points. If both Seekers went down, the game went down as a tie. But that rarely happened.

Behind the starters were the Irish mascots. Sixteen leprechauns, arranged in formations of four, flew into the stadium, trailing colorful and dazzling rainbows. The extremely rare creatures flew around and then in a burst of gold, began showering what appeared to be actual gold coins on the spectators. Harry and Daphne both knew better. Leprechaun gold vanished after just a few hours. He yelled to Ginny, who was gathering some of it. “It's not real! It won't last!”

Ginny looked up at him, blushed, and pushed the coins she'd already collected onto the ground. Ron apparently didn't know, as he was stuffing fistfuls of gold into his robes. Arthur watched the shower wistfully. He obviously wished that it was real.

Once the cheering had returned to merely *near*-deafening levels, Bagman introduced the Bulgarian team. But unlike the Irish, the first out of the tunnel on the opposite side of the field were the

mascots...mascots that appeared to be *breathhtakingly beautiful women*. In his mind, breaking through the daze he was experiencing as the women began to dance, he heard a series of sharp words. *Veela. Fingers in ears. NOW!* It was Daphne's voice, and he obeyed instantly.

The haze faded, and though the Veela still appeared quite attractive, he was no longer under their spell. Ginny was laughing at Ron who was straining against his father as he tried to reach the dancing Veela. Slightly more alarming was the fact that the Weasley twins had maniacal grins on their faces and both had drawn their wands. Bill and Charlie both had their fingers stuffed into their ears, and Charlie was trying to kick one or both of his brothers in the head. Hermione looked indignant, and had her arms crossed over her chest. She knew what Veela were, yet she found the men's reaction to them disgusting. It was rather typical of her.

Harry was now quite grateful for Daphne. In an effort to *impress* the Veela, he might have blown up half of the stadium. Bagman had somehow broken free of the spell and began loudly barking out the names of the Bulgarian National Players. The Veela stopped dancing to mass boos. The twins and Ron both looked quite embarrassed. Arthur had an exasperated look on his face. "Damn those Bulgarians, bringing *Veela* to an even like this. I realize that they are native to that country, but it's still unnecessary," he grumbled.

The Bulgarian National team followed. The applause was the loudest for Viktor Krum, as it should have been. The Irish supporters were as anxious to see him play as the Bulgarian fans. The teams flew around for several more minutes as the referees met and took to the skies. The Head Referee was the mustachioed Hassan Mostafa, a veteran official of the Arab Quidditch League. With the mascots no longer commanding the attention of the crowd, Mostafa pointed towards the sideline, at a junior official carrying an ornate wooden box. He looked at his watch, and then nodded. The younger referee released the Golden Snitch. Ten seconds later, Mostafa drifted to the center of the field, the red Quaffle in his right hand. The Chasers waited opposing each other. Troy, Mullet, and Moran on one side, Ivanova, Levski, and Dimitrov on the other. The Beaters waited in the wings; the Bludgers were released as soon as play began. The Irish team's

Connolly and Quigley stared down the Bulgarian's Volkov and Vulcanov. The Keepers, Zograf for Bulgaria and Ryan for Ireland, circled their hoops impatiently.

Mostafa blew his whistle, hurled the Quaffle skyward, and the 131st Quidditch World Cup began.

The Irish immediately showed off excellent teamwork. Moran seized the Quaffle and fired it to Mullet as two Bulgarian Chasers tried to strip him of the red ball. The Beaters began hammering the two Bludgers everywhere, their strokes short and precise, their aim perfect. Almost by instinct, the Chasers and two Seekers evaded the blows. The Irish Chasers were moving almost too fast to be seen, and Harry was having trouble keeping up with Bagman's commentary. Troy to Mullet to Moran. Back to Troy, who did a spiraling dive to avoid a pair of well-struck Bludgers, before performing a behind the back pass to Mullet, cutting in from the right. He drove towards the goal, with Zograf rising to meet him, then flipped back to Troy. Zograf was not fooled when Troy immediately flipped it to Moran. But he didn't see Mullet, and the feint worked perfectly as Mullet hurled it through the right goalpost to give Ireland a 10-0 lead.

The Leprechauns danced, performing a number of acrobatic jumps and riling the Irish supporters into a frenzy. Even Ginny was screaming. Harry was doing his best to keep neutral, to watch the game objectively, but that was becoming difficult.

The crowd was silenced however, when in a four second period, Moran was stripped of the Quaffle and Ivanova hurled it past the dazed Irish Keeper to even the score. The game was on.

Ireland scored four more times, taking a 50-10 lead. But it was clear from the beginning that Ireland had an enormous advantage in Chasers. The score reflected that, and even the skill of the Bulgarian Beaters couldn't keep Troy, Mullet, and Moran from scoring constantly. No, in Harry's eyes, the battle to watch was between the veteran Seeker Lynch and his young opponent Krum. Currently, both were searching for the Snitch, but neither one had spotted it, or attempted any kind of deceptive maneuver. But as a Seeker himself, Harry could see the strategy involved in both Seeker's seemingly

aimless drifting. They drifted slowly, away from the action, but were covering precise patterns that minimized the amount of space they could see. Lynch put on a burst of speed at one point, but before the rest of the crowd even noticed, he stopped, having either lost the Snitch or realizing he'd never seen it in the first place. Harry noted that Krum never moved to follow him. He was obviously extremely confident in his own abilities, so much that he decided that if *he* hadn't seen it, then it wasn't there.

It was a wise tactic. Doubt led to indecision. Indecision led to mistakes. Mistakes could cost you the contest.

Harry finally tired of watching the Seekers and turned his attention back to the rest of the game. Just in time to watch the Bulgarians rally. They began to slowly chip away at the lead, their Beaters changing tactics, with one running interference and the other harassing the Irish Chasers, breaking their practiced formations and creating confusion. In ten minutes, a 60-10 lead became 60-50. Then 60-60. Then, shockingly, Volkov hammered a Bludger into the back of Troy. To the crowd's disbelief, Levski literally powered his way past the Keeper, shoving him aside and hurling the Quaffle into the center hoop at point-blank range. Bulgaria took the lead, 70-60. The Veela danced, but most of the Irish fans were too shocked by the turn of events to be entranced. The Bulgarians hooted and cried loudly. Lynch called timeout to reorganize his team as a large contingent of Irish fans began to boo.

"Well, this is certainly unexpected," Arthur said. "No one has come close to stopping those three. Much less tied the game. I'm pretty sure this is the first time they've been behind the entire tournament. They won every other match they played handily. I think they blew out the Japanese by something like 400-10."

Ginny looked stunned. "Wow," she said. Harry nodded.

Mostafa blew his whistle, and the timeout was ended. The teams rose back into the air, but not before Lynch had screamed something at his three Chasers.

Whatever it was, it worked, because in the next five minutes, the Irish dominated. They scored five successive goals, and then answered an

Ivanova goal with four more. It was 150-80, and the game was rapidly getting out of hand. Harry watched, using his Omnoculars to break down the last scoring drive. The movement, called a 'Spinning Top Formation' was executed flawlessly. Moran now had a game high 60 points.

There was a roar of the crowd, and Harry pulled down the Omnoculars and turned his attention to the drama unfolding in the middle of the field. Krum dove straight at the ground, almost vertical. Yet as he watched through the Omnoculars once more, there was something about his eyes that told Harry that this was a trick. A second later, he was dead certain it was a deception. And sure enough, Krum pulled out of his near suicidal dive and rocketed across the field. Lynch, following closely, wasn't so lucky. He slammed into the ground, catapulted off his broomstick and flung hard onto his back. He lay there, motionless. Hermione gasped in horror. He waved an arm, and the crowd cheered a bit. Lynch called time out, and a pair of mediwizards headed out to him. Miraculously, Lynch managed to get back on his broom and take off, though his flight was somewhat wobbly. The crowd roared with approval at the grit and toughness of the Irish captain. He waved weakly back.

Still, for all his heroics, it was only a minute and a half later that Krum tricked him again, and again he smashed headlong into the grass. This time, he managed to slow, for all the good it did. However, what was different was that although Lynch hadn't realized it was a Wronski feint, Connolly had. And he crushed a Bludger sending it hurtling through the air at Krum's head. He apparently didn't hit it as well as Harry though initially, because the impact didn't knock Krum unconscious. It *did* shatter his nose. Blood poured from the ruined proboscis, but Krum refused attention. He was focused on one thing: the Snitch. With the Bulgarians now trailing by 150 points, he was rapidly becoming their only hope to salvage a victory.

The Irish Chasers continued to pound the Quaffle deep into the Bulgarian's side of the field, doing away entirely with intricate passes and instead going for strong, hard move. There were multiple collisions, two of which resulted in Bulgarian penalty shots. But even those 20 points meant little: the Irish lead grew to 220, and the game was rapidly becoming a blowout.

But once again, the Bulgarians refused to allow the game to slip out of reach. Incredibly, they made the adjustment, holding the rampaging trio of Troy, Mullet, and Moran to just 20 points as they in turn sent the Quaffle soaring past the outstretched arms of Ryan twelve times. A half-hour after the game had appeared to be over, it was suddenly 400-280. The game remained within reach. But Lynch called his final non-injury timeout, and the Chasers rallied. The thrilling game, just over an hour-and-a-half old, now saw the Irish leading 440-290. And then it came to a sudden and shocking end.

Harry attributed the fact that he spotted the flicker of gold that was the coveted Golden Snitch before Krum did to the fact that he was sitting, relatively comfortably, in the top box of the stands, whereas Krum was soaring high above a confused maelstrom of red and green blurs. He set off after it, but had to wait; if he caught it now, with the Bulgarians trailing by 150, it would be a tie. He wanted a win. And it seemed like he would get it when Dimitrov fired a shot that deflected off of Ryan's right arm...right into the right hoop. The Bulgarians roared, the Veela danced, and Krum launched himself in pursuit of the Snitch.

But all he saw was Lynch desperately flattening himself against his broom in an effort to keep up with him. He was using all of his focus in his pursuit of the tiny winged ball. And so he didn't see Troy score his 12th goal of the game, making the lead 150. And as he put on a final burst of speed, he didn't see a well-aimed Bludger from Connolly slam into the right arm of Ivanova, breaking it at the elbow and allowing Mullet to scoop up the loose Quaffle. And his certainly didn't see Mullet fly straight at the Keeper, barreling into him, and, just before the moment of impact, throwing the Quaffle with incredible precision past the left ear of Zograf, giving the Irish a decisive 160 point lead seconds before Krum's gloved hand closed around the struggling Snitch. The game was over.

But as the crowd exploded, Harry watched, still stunned by what he'd seen, as Krum's grin of triumph turned to a look of pure horror.

"IRELAND WINS!!!!!!!" Bagman cried. The crowd erupted, shaking the very foundations of the stadium. The Weasleys cheered loudly, and Tonks began performing a rapid series of changes that appeared like

a blue of color, Harry presumed in celebration. Fred and George high-fived one another as Arthur slapped Ron on the back. Ginny screamed, and Hermione laughed at her. On the field, the entire green-clad team barreled into the hero, Mullet, combining into a surging mass of celebrating green-robed figures.

But Harry's attention was elsewhere. His eyes followed Viktor Krum as he dejectedly floated towards the ground, dismounting and slowly trudging back towards the Bulgarian locker room. A few players slapped him on the back as they left the field. Finally, his frustration boiled over, and he hurled the Snitch to the ground, stomping on it and crushing it to pieces. He spat on it, and stormed down the tunnel out of sight.

Harry was amazed. He'd just watched the greatest Seeker in the world lose a match for his country, and then lose his composure. The legend of Viktor Krum had, for now, been brutally torn down.

Harry and Daphne separated themselves from the throngs of people leaving the stadium, and without explaining what was happening to Hermione and Ginny, slipped into the dark night. They headed for the edge of the moor, far away from any of the tents. There were loud cries of glee and exaltation as the post-match parties got underway. There would be many hung-over wizards leaving the moor the next morning.

Harry stared into the darkness. He didn't know where he was going, but he continued to follow Daphne. The confidence in her walk told him she knew exactly where they were going to meet the Greengrasses. And soon enough, out of the pitch darkness, the silhouettes of two people became visible. As they drew closer, he got his first look at Aiden Greengrass. To say the least, it was not what he had expected.

"Let's get a little light, shall we?" he asked, in a jovial, relaxed tone. "*Incendio!*" A small jet of blue fire shot out of the end of his wand and onto a pile of sticks that had obviously been arranged; illuminating the woods they now stood in. Harry looked closely at the father and daughter. Daphne wore plain black robes, with her hair half-up, half-

down. She wore a necklace that might possibly have been pearl, but she didn't look that much different from how she looked everyday at school. On the other hand, as he took in the sight of Aiden Greengrass, there were quite a few surprises.

Aiden Greengrass was a tall man, just less than two meters, with a slim, athletic frame. He appeared quite young, maybe not even in his forties. He wore robes of a dark crimson, lined with gold. His dark blonde hair was wavy and worn long, and he had a neatly trimmed goatee. His blue eyes, less pale than his daughter's, were curious and searching as they looked him over. But he seemed to be staring past Harry's physical appearance, almost as if looking into his magical core. It was unnerving, but in a different way than Daphne's universal apathy. What most surprised Harry was that he saw no trace of the pain that the man had suffered in losing his wife and elder daughter. His guardian wore her past like a colorful robe; beyond the disfiguring scars that marred her face, one could look into her eyes and see the agony she had been through. Aiden's eyes betrayed none of that, but still showed emotion, unlike his daughter. He appeared almost childlike. It distantly reminded Harry of the pictures he'd seen of Edmond Dressler.

Daphne seemed slightly less taken aback, but he could feel her surprise. She recovered, of course. "Are you planning to stare at him for a few hours, Aiden? Or is there a point to this meeting?" she asked, her voice suspicious and cold. It became obvious to Harry that no matter what she said, she didn't like the fact that her ward was rubbing shoulders with dangerous Purebloods.

Aiden cleared his throat. "I apologize, Daphne," he said, using her first name in kind. That was tradition among Purebloods; whatever name that a person addressed you by (assuming of course, that it was not an insult) was the name that both participants in a conversation would use, be it surname or given name. To do otherwise carried with it an implication of hostility. "I must admit, Mr. Potter, that I am somewhat surprised with the way you've turned out. I expected the unusual maturity and critical gaze, but I did *not* expect that you would end up in the same House as my daughter. I expected that you would join my House."

Harry frowned. He was implying that he *hadn't* been a Slytherin, quite unusual for a Pureblood patriarch. A Ravenclaw, perhaps? "And what House would that be, sir?" he asked quietly.

Aiden smiled. It was warm, but it also had an element of anticipation. He understood why as soon as he responded. "Why, Gryffindor, my dear boy. The House of your parents and their friends."

That revelation hit Harry like the Hogwarts Express going at top speed. A *Gryffindor*? Aiden Greengrass, one of the most feared and respected men in the Pureblood community, an expert on Dark curses and how to defend against them had been a *Gryffindor*? Suddenly, the red robes with gold trim made sense. He'd been sending a hint. And Harry had completely missed it.

His guardian was growing impatient. "Enough, Aiden. You called us out here for a reason, did you not?"

The tall man nodded. "I assume," he began, "that if you are here, that you received my letter. And that you know, from that letter and from what my daughter told you, that I have taken a great interest in your progress."

"If I may ask, why?" Harry queried.

For reasons unknown to him, Aiden's daughter had to hide a bit of a grimace. The fact that Harry noticed anything at all paid tribute to how much she disapproved. Aiden was pensive for a moment. "I assume you know what happened to my family. My wife, Lysa, and my eldest daughter, Margaret, were murdered by Voldemort's Death Eaters. Daphne and I survived because we thought it best to separate, and make it more difficult for the Greengrass line to be exterminated, as was the Dark Lord's goal. We were, in that way, successful. But the only reason that I survived was because the Dark Lord was defeated...by you," he said slowly. "As you might think, I have a bit of a debt to you...at least, before I learned that I had misplaced my gratitude. That I really owed my life, and the life of my young daughter, to a common Muggleborn. That you did not possess any remarkable power as an infant, and that it was something as unremarkable as *love* that saved you."

“I’d like to remind you that Aiden is an expert - if not *the* expert - on Dark Curses and their effects. It’s hardly surprising that he was able to put together what happened that night,” the Grey Maiden interjected. “He’s also one of the best duelists in Britain...after me and Bellatrix, of course.” Daphne was obviously trying to make a statement by bragging, something she rarely did. She was trying to establish some kind of superiority over Aiden.

Harry nodded. He knew all of this already, from his guardian and Daphne Greengrass. But hearing Aiden admit all of this was still meaningful. He listened politely as the Greengrass patriarch continued. “Still, though I eventually accepted that you had little or nothing to do with the fall of the Dark Lord, I refused to give up on you. You see, Harry, it was incomprehensible to me that you, of all the Wizarding children in the world, would have been specifically targeted by the Dark Lord. Because this was not a simply raid to eliminate two important members of the Order of the Phoenix. The death of your parents was collateral damage. The real target was *you*. And that is the question that has baffled and fascinated me for the last ten or so years. I have conducted extensive studies of Wizarding history, for history tends to repeat itself, for similar cases, where an infant was responsible for some kind of extraordinarily important historical event. And I found exactly one case. Do you know what it was?”

“Merlin,” his guardian said. Then, he realized that it wasn’t an exclamation. It was the answer to the question. Confirming his suspicions, Daphne continued. “During the first ten years of his life, Merlin, as an extremely powerful Wizarding child, was repeatedly targeted by enemies of his father. He survived three separate assassination attempts on his own, and would eventually grow to become the greatest wizard in history.” Harry nodded. The story of Merlin, though it shared a few similarities to the tale of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table told to young Muggle children, was in fact much different from the legend. Merlin was far more than simply an advisor to the Muggle King – he ruled over the *entire* Wizarding world, from England to Japan. Only twenty years before his death, he acted as a private tutor for four of the most important wizards and witches in Wizarding history: Godric Gryffindor, Salazar Slytherin, Helga Hufflepuff, and Rowena Ravenclaw. The founding of Hogwarts forever transformed Wizarding education, as it moved from

private tutoring that few could afford to a large boarding school setup. The Beaxbatons Academy, Durmstrang, and around a dozen other magical schools were all established in the following one hundred years.

“Exactly,” Aiden said. “And as you could imagine, that fueled my desire to unravel the mystery. As my daughter can attest, I became almost obsessed. Not with you specifically, but with what you *represented*. I kept an eye on you, to be sure, but knew nothing of your whereabouts except that you were somewhere on the North American continent with Daphne Dressler. When you returned, I continued to follow your progress. I had faith that I would see evidence of your great destiny. And at the end of your second year, when my daughter described to me everything that the *Daily Prophet* omitted, I felt that something great had happened.”

“But you didn’t know *what*,” his daughter said, speaking for the first time. “And you spent the entire summer trying to find out. And then you told me to contact him, and communicate your interest. I decided to find out if you were worthy of my father’s attentions,” She said to Harry. “I tested you on several occasions in several different ways. I remain skeptical. Though the events at the end of last year, specifically, the change you seemed to undergo, have done much to erase my doubt, at least in your magical potential.” Daphne’s voice, as usual, betrayed nothing, and Harry had to carefully listen to each word to determine how she felt. He thought she was being completely truthful.

“That change being?” Daphne asked.

The younger girl met her gaze, not showing the slightest reaction to her marred features and hard stare. “The massive increase in power that I’m sure you know the origin of. The fact that he now stood out from all of the other Wizarding children at Hogwarts, that he seemed to possess power of an amount that was unheard of for a young wizard. The fact that he became more confident in his stride, in the way he carried himself. All of these changed overnight,” she said in a level, matter-of-factly voice.

Harry's guardian didn't reply. She stared down the much younger woman, most likely stunned by the composure and maturity that she showed. She shook her head slightly, pulling herself out of her thoughts. She returned her gaze to Aiden. "What do you propose?" she asked, her voice hard, though not demanding.

Aiden spread his hands. "I propose nothing concrete. I am willing to continue communication between Harry and myself, but I am willing to commit to nothing at this time. I risk much by associating with you."

"That is a given, Aiden," Daphne told him. "I am not asking you to commit to an alliance or any kind of agreement set in stone. All I ask of you is that you tell me something that I didn't already know."

Aiden considered that. "I'm not sure I can do what you ask, Daphne," he said quietly. "I am in a precarious position, but I promise you this: if either of you are in danger, in any way, I will come to your aid. But I will not acknowledge this agreement in public. I cannot risk that."

Daphne nodded. Harry spoke. "Thank you, Mr. Greengrass," he said. "I will look forward to meeting with you again."

"Please, Harry, call me Aiden in private. Assuming I may do the same, of course," the man told him.

Harry nodded. "Very well. We should be leaving now."

Daphne concurred. "We will retire for the night. I assume that you are departing."

"You are correct," Aiden told her. "I have business to attend to back at my Manor. It was good seeing you again, Daphne."

Daphne didn't respond verbally, merely nodding. As they turned to go, there were a series of loud explosions from the direction of the campsites. At first, Harry thought they might just be part of the celebration. Then he heard the screams.

Daphne cursed. "I knew they wouldn't be able to resist," she hissed. "Death Eaters," she told all four of them. "I saw many of them today, and anticipated something like this. They've been restless. I feel the

Dark Magic swirling in the air.” As she spoke, the field was illuminated by a red-orange glow. Someone had started a fire. “We must go,” she said quickly. Aiden nodded and he and his daughter disappeared into the darkness. Once they were gone, Daphne grabbed Harry’s hand, jerking him into motion. They ran alongside one another, wands drawn, and raced back over the moor towards the chaos surrounding what was left of the Wizarding dwellings. The screams were getting louder now, and not just because they were getting closer. When they reached the outskirts of the camp, they found numerous wizards in a panic, racing about with half-packed suitcases, fleeing the methodical devastation inflicted by the Death Eaters. Daphne and Harry head the opposite direction and ducked behind a few tents. They could hear Burning Curses being cast from up ahead. The area they were now in was completely deserted, or at least, it appeared that way. Harry saw a flash of blue hair. “Tonks,” he breathed. Daphne nodded.

“Andi,” she hissed. Andromeda and her daughter poked their heads out from behind a tent. “Did they teach you how to lay an ambush in Auror School?” she asked the young Auror graduate. Tonks nodded. “Then use those skills. I don’t intend to defeat them all, but we’ll be able to scatter them. They are most likely drunk and not expecting resistance. If we cut down a few, the rest will flee,” she whispered. “Wait for me, I’ll start it.”

They waited. The sound of marching feet and randomly thrown Burning Curses grew louder. Harry waited behind Daphne’s back, his wand clutched tightly in his right hand, trying to figure out what combination of spells he would use. His heart pounded in his ears, sweat dripping down his back. He was tired, and not in any shape for a prolonged duel. He could only hope that Daphne was right about the Death Eater’s cowardice. He peered through a small gap between the fabric of the tent they hid behind, and saw the column approaching. They were dressed in black, wearing white masks and chanting rhythmically. One of them randomly blew up a tent for no apparent reason other than a desire to cause destruction. They drew closer, and Harry’s heart began to race faster as he feared that they might torch the tents that the four of them were hiding behind. “Wait,” she whispered. “One...two...*three!*” She cried the last, and flung herself directly into the marching Death Eater’s path, dropping into a

dueling stance. She allowed her cloak to fly off, exposing her scarred features.

The Death Eaters were stunned by her appearance, but instead of a Killing Curse, which Harry had feared his guardian would use, she used a Flinging Hex to launch the lead Death Eaters backwards into his compatriots, throwing all of them to the ground. Tonks and Andromeda leapt out of hiding, and the young Auror, displaying all of the grace that she never displayed in everyday situations, launched a barrage of Striking Curses and Bludgeoning Curses, hammering the Death Eaters to the ground. Daphne's attack became more vicious, and a powerful Blasting Curse struck the ground in front of the formation, blowing surprised and disoriented Death Eaters into the air.

Harry, sensing his moment, emerged, and sent a bolt of pure magical energy into the center of the formation. The purple light struck the ground, causing a massive explosion. It didn't kill any of the Death Eaters, but it was more than enough to cause them to turn and flee, most dragging with them broken bones and twisted ankles. Harry sagged, as if most of his energy had been poured into that burst. Several of them fired curses back at their attackers, which Daphne blocked with ease. With the Death Eaters in retreat, she grabbed Harry by the shoulder. "We've done our job; let's get out of here!" she cried over the din. Tonks, Andromeda, and Harry ran away as Daphne followed, hurling curses to fend off pursuit and blocking any stray spells from the Death Eaters. "Bloody Ministry," she cursed.

They ran back through the tents, towards the woods on the other side of the moor. They ducked behind a row of tents once they were far from their attackers. They could hear CRACKs in the distance as either Ministry reinforcements arrived or the Death Eaters Disapparated. Suddenly, Harry felt himself grabbed by the shoulders and roughly spun around. He tried to resist, but felt his knees go weak as he saw that Daphne had seized him. In the darkness, her scarred face was straight out a nightmare. "*What do you think you were doing?*" she demanded, her voice harsh and strained.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, his voice weak. He couldn't remember ever seeing Daphne this furious with him. She was

breathing heavily, and angrily swiped her hair out of her face as she formulated a response.

"I have warned you about using that...*ability*," she said, spitting the word. "It is *dangerous*. You *know* that," she said, her words soft, yet with a hard edge. This wasn't just her normal concern for his well-being. There was something else there, some kind of desperation that he'd never seen in her before.

"Harry? Daphne?" Tonks' voice called out. "Where are you?"

"Over here!" Daphne yelled. "We'll continue this conversation later. Do not try what you did again," she ordered him. Harry gave in.

"Yes ma'am," he said, almost as a junior Auror would speak to his commander.

Tonks and Andromeda made their way over. "S'place is deserted," Tonks reported. "They must have run somewhere else when those bloody Death Eaters started blowing things up. Maybe into the forest?" she suggested.

"Possibly," Andromeda said. "I don't hear anything, though."

Daphne considered for a moment. "It's unlikely the Ministry has evacuated them. They are hiding-"

"*MORSMORDRE!*" a harsh, hoarse voice cried, shattering the silence. Daphne's eyes widened as a green jet of light shot into the sky, the same hue as a Killing Curse. It blossomed, and a sickly green apparition appeared high over the forest. Harry recognized it instantly. It was the image of a serpent sliding out the mouth of a skull. The Dark Mark.

Daphne took off towards the point where the castor must have been. But by the time they caught up with her, she was standing alone in a clearing, examining a familiar-looking wand. She turned to face them. "Whoever cast it is gone. We should go-"

Multiple CRACKs of Apparating wizards sounded. A circle of about twenty wizards formed around them, and they began firing Stunning

Spells. Harry, Daphne, Andromeda, and Tonks deflected them with ease. Only a lone, surprised opponent, or an unarmed one, would have been taken down by the Stunners. The wizard clearly in charge cried out to his compatriots. "Cease fire!"

Daphne stepped forward. "Amos. It took you long enough. The castor is gone."

"We'll see about that," a refined voice said. An older man wearing fine robes and dark hair stepped forward. It was Bartemius Crouch, the former Head of Magical Law Enforcement, a position now held by Amelia Bones. "Hand over that wand, Dressler."

Daphne looked surprised. "Which one? My own or the one I found on the ground, the one that was undoubtedly used to cast the Dark Mark?" Before they could answer, she pointed her own wand at the apparition and cried, "*Deletrius!*" The green serpent and skull vanished. Daphne returned her wand to her wrist holster, and then flipped the wand she had found to the man apparently called Amos. Harry didn't know or recognize him. But he did recognize one of the men standing off to the side. It was Arthur Weasley. He ran over to him.

"Where are Ginny and Hermione?" he asked. Arthur looked up in surprise. "They're with the others; I don't know where. The Death Eaters have gone, so they aren't in any danger. I suppose you might have had something to do with that."

"You could say that," Harry replied. "And thank you," he added, returning to his guardian's side. She stood a few feet from Crouch, her arms defiantly crossed across her chest. She and Crouch clearly had an unpleasant history.

Finally, Crouch cast a Reverse Spell, and it was confirmed that the wand Daphne had found had been used to cast the Dark Mark. What came next was unexpected. "Can't you cast a spell to find out who it's registered to?" Daphne asked, obviously perfectly aware that they could do exactly that.

Crouch growled in annoyance, and performed the spell. Harry's jaw dropped. He had been right when he thought the wand looked familiar. The name floating in the air was *Hermione Jane Granger*.

"The wand must have been stolen," Harry found himself saying. "Hermione's a Muggleborn; there's no way she could have cast the Dark Mark...nor would she have any desire to."

Crouch and Amos both nodded. "Very well." He tossed the wand in the air, and Harry caught it. "Return the wand to your friend."

"Sir," one of the Ministry wizards called. "I saw some movement in the bushes."

Crouch's head snapped in his direction. "Where?"

"Over here," another called. "But...bloody hell, what is *she* doing here?"

The entire group hurried over. As they drew closer they could hear faint sobs. Harry peered through the group of onlookers. Ludo Bagman, wand drawn, towered over a house elf. A familiar-looking one. *Winky*, to be exact. "Elf? What are you doing here? This is a crime scene!" Crouch roared angrily. Winky cowered in fear.

"Winky was...Winky was..." she sobbed.

"I don't care what you were doing. You disobeyed a direct order. That means *clothes*," Crouch said gruffly.

Winky begged to be punished in some other way, but Crouch had clearly made up his mind. *Hermione's not going to be happy with this*, Harry thought. Once the house-elf had been dealt with, Crouch turned back to the wizards that had come with him. "Return to your families and make sure they are well. If you can, help supervise the departure. I have a feeling many wizards have already made illegal Apparitions to escape the chaos. I'll also need someone to record all of the destroyed tents. We'll be getting insurance demands soon."

With that, the men dispersed. Arthur approached where Daphne, Harry, Tonks, and Andromeda stood. "Crouch can be a right old

bastard sometimes," he admitted. "Let's find my family and Hermione," he suggested.

They located them about a half-hour later. Hermione and Ginny were extremely relieved to see him (and both showed it, much to Ron's displeasure.) They were alarmed when they found out what part he had played in the entire thing. They both chastised him for putting himself in danger, though Ginny seemed to blame Daphne more for getting him in trouble. They also both demanded to know where he had disappeared to. Arthur saved him from having to lie by announcing that the Weasleys would be returning to the Burrow, and that the rest of them were welcome to come. Daphne accepted the generous offer.

A/N: Well, we're rolling along with book four. Already past the cup. Hogwarts in a few chapters!

There will undoubtedly be concerns/questions about the way I altered the World Cup, making the game far more exciting and turning Krum from noble loser into the quintessential "choker." There is a purpose to this. I want to use Krum in this story, and I felt the need to knock him off that perch that JKR gives him. He's just a kid, after all. Harry could have just as easily done the same thing. A veteran might have thought to check the score one last time. Krum, in his youthful enthusiasm and adrenaline from playing on the world stage, didn't. That's the way it goes in sports.

Yes, Aiden Greengrass was a Gryffindor. If you were expecting a somewhat nicer version of Lucius Malfoy, think again. Aiden is a fascinating character in concept, and I'll seek to develop him into something unique. I don't plan to get him and Daphne together, just in case that possibility surfaces in your mind. If you haven't guessed yet, this series is not going to end happily. It may be victory, but at what cost?

Harry did something stupid. And Daphne freaked out for a reason. This will also be one of the few time you'll see Death Eaters routed. The amount of alcohol they imbibed was a great help. I used the

movie, because blowing up tents is more Death Eaterish than playing around with a bunch of Muggles. They cause terror.

Hermione hasn't abandoned the Great House-Elf Crusade yet. Harry will do everything in his power to prevent the formation of S.P.E.W.

If you really don't like the wizarding world right now, it's perfectly understandable. They are quite backwards in a number of ways.

I'm tired, so there isn't much more to tell. Next chapter, which is about half-way done, should be very angsty. Another peek into the mind of Daphne is on the horizon. Bill Weasley will also be featured. I like him.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter 3: Fate

Daphne, Andromeda and Tonks took their leave at the Portkey return point atop Stoatshead Hill. The latter two both had to return to the Ministry, and Daphne said she had things needing attention at Dressler Manor. She told Harry that he could floo back whenever he felt like it. He found this a bit odd since it had been she who accepted the Weasley's offer to come to their home, but did not comment.

He'd never seen the Burrow before. As he, Hermione and the Weasleys rounded a turn in the road, he suddenly understood why Ginny had been so embarrassed when she'd spent the Christmas of Second Year. The Burrow was, well...the most unusual-looking dwelling that Harry had ever seen. It had to have been held up by magic, because the lopsided structure resembled an inverted bowling pin. Harry became aware that Ginny was looking at him as he stared at the Burrow, and that her blush was getting worse every second that passed. Finally, she blurted, "I realize it's not much to look at but, well...it's *home*."

Harry nodded. "I'd love to know the spells that keep it together. How much space is there on each floor?"

"Basically enough for the staircase and one room. It's nothing compared to Dressler Manor," she said, in a typically self-deprecating fashion. Harry looked at her.

"You *do* realize that Daphne and I only live there because it cuts the property taxes in *half*, prevents the Ministry from declaring it derelict and *re-possessing* it, and because it's *convenient*, right? We don't even use most of the manor. We were perfectly content with our house in Claw's Clan," Harry explained. "I'm sure there are a few rooms where not even the house-elves have ventured lately."

Hermione made a disgusted noise. He'd explained what had happened to Winky, and Hermione's response had been exactly as he'd expected. "We do treat them quite well, as you know," he reminded her. "We don't free them because we need them and they wouldn't survive unless they found another family. And that wouldn't help them much at all. Daphne gives them days off and keeps an eye on their health."

"That's all well and good," Hermione said. "But the point is that they are still enslaved...and believe me, I *do* remember everything you told me about house-elves needing to be enslaved in order to survive. But just because it's *necessary* doesn't make it *right*."

Harry shrugged. "I'll leave the righteous crusading to you; that's not my thing. I can admire you for it, but I'm not going to take part in it myself."

Hermione sighed. "I'd like to do something about it, but all that would end up happening would be that I'd embarrass myself and both of you, and accomplish nothing. I used to think it was just brain-washing, but after everything that I've read, I'm not so sure. It just doesn't seem right that nature would make it necessary for sentient beings to be enslaved or perish."

Harry had to agree with that statement. House-elves had a rather rough lot in life.

"If you two are done arguing about house-elves, could we go inside?" Ginny asked. Both of them looked at her and realized that the entire Weasley clan had already gone into the Burrow. Feeling a bit embarrassed, Harry followed his friend into her home. As Harry entered the kitchen, he saw a plump red-headed woman he immediately recognized as Molly Weasley. He'd seen her before, on the platform before they boarded the Hogwarts Express, but he'd never really been formally introduced.

One thing that immediately drew Harry's attention in the chaos of the Weasley household was a peculiar grandfather clock against the far wall. Rather than telling the time, each Weasley family member had a hand with a name and accompanying picture. Instead of numerals, there were words such as 'traveling,' 'work,' 'prison,' 'home,' and, more ominously, 'mortal peril.' All nine hands currently pointed to 'home.'

Ginny ran up and gave her mother a quick hug before Mrs. Weasley launched into a panicked rant about how worried she had been for them, holding up a copy of that day's Daily Prophet, complete with a huge Wizzarding photograph of the Dark Mark twinkling malevolently in the sky. Arthur assured her that they were all fine, and then

introduced Harry. Harry held out his hand. "I think we've met before, though it was some time ago," he told her.

Molly Weasley nodded. "Yes, dear, it was just before you left for Hogwarts for the first time. Your guardian introduced us. You've grown quite a bit since then." Ginny made a coughing noise, probably covering up her laughter at the way her mother was fawning over him like some kind of lost child. "I'm sure all of you are hungry, so I've made some breakfast," she said, addressing all of the other eleven people in the house.

Mrs. Weasley's breakfast was even better than the sandwiches. It very nearly matched the perfection of the Hogwarts house-elves, but in other ways it was superior. She had clearly used a few different ingredients in most of the food. The pancakes were especially good, and the bacon was excellent. Once they had eaten more than their share, the Weasley family broke up. Percy and Arthur went to the Ministry to help deal with the backlash of the Death Eater attacks at the World Cup. Miraculously, not a single person had been killed, and far more injuries had been caused by panicked trampling than by Dark Curses. Charlie was heading back to Romania, as dragon mating season was fast approaching and preparations needed to be made. Bill stuck around, and even played a game of chess with Harry (neither of them were particularly good) while Ginny and Hermione chatted. Ron disappeared to parts unknown with Fred and George, which probably wasn't a good thing.

Harry had decided quickly that he liked the eldest of the Weasley brothers. Bill had an exceptionally sharp mind and a detailed memory. He had a good sense of humor, but also a fierce loyalty to those he loved and what he believed in. He could see why Ginny idolized him. He told Harry a bit about his occupation as a Curse Breaker during their game. He was surprised by Harry's interest in goblins, and even offered to send him some literature he'd obtained from the goblins that worked with him in Egypt.

Harry could also sense that Bill was a powerful wizard, the most powerful in his family. At this point, it was difficult to know what Ginny's ceiling was, but if you kept the Twins as two separate individuals, Bill was more magically gifted. Combined, of course, the

two were remarkably strong. Harry had developed a sense for detecting magic and the levels of power that wizards and witches gave off. He wasn't sure it was so much a new ability as it was simply being more sensitive and attuned to magic in general. Bill would clearly be someone that Harry would want on his side in a fight. The Twins would be as well, though their methods were likely to be quite...unorthodox.

So engrossed in his thoughts, Harry was surprised when he heard Bill ask, "So, Harry. What's going on between you and my little sister?"

Harry started slightly, and then recovered his composure. He'd been expecting a question perhaps about why he was so interested in goblins, a subject that most wizards showed little or no desire to learn more about. "She and I are friends. Best friends even," he replied, trying to sound as natural as he could. He realized that Hermione and Ginny had gone, and it was now just Bill and Harry, playing chess on a worn table in the small sitting room just off the kitchen.

Bill nodded. "So there's nothing else between the two of you?" Harry shook his head, though he had to resist thinking of the strange feelings he'd had about Ginny the previous year. After all, he'd never felt anything like that for Hermione or Tonks, and he'd been around women for the majority of his life, so there wasn't an explanation to be found there.

"Good," Bill said simply. Harry wasn't so naïve as to believe that the conversation was over. "I don't *suspect* anything, mind you. But it's obvious that she likes you. Not in *that way*, mind, or, at least, I don't think so. But she admires you and really looks at you as a role model. Did you know that?"

Harry considered how to answer that question. The truthful answer was that he'd known that since the day he'd met the young redhead. But that wasn't exactly flattering on Ginny, and might imply that she'd never really gotten over her childhood crush on him. This was obviously not the case. "I've noticed," he replied neutrally. "She definitely looks to me for guidance."

Bill nodded, directing his attention back to the chess game in front of them. He told his bishop to take Harry's knight. Harry immediately

retaliated by ordering his pawn to take the bishop. "I'm not sure you're the ideal role model, but I trust what Ginny tells me, and she tells me that you are a kind and thoughtful individual. And I've never once blamed you for her being Sorted into Slytherin. I don't mean to be offensive, but I'd been anxious about that possibility for years. She simply didn't fit the mold of a typical Gryffindor. I realize she's had a rough go of it, especially because of my family," he said, sounding quite frustrated toward the end. "It might be a good thing, though, to have a family member in Slytherin. Besides the Weasleys having a chance to see that a Slytherin can be a decent person, our family is well thought-of, if not by the Purebloods, of course. But it might help get rid of this stupid myth that all Slytherins are Death Eaters in training. Of course, I haven't even mentioned you."

Harry gave him a smile, one that might not have been completely genuine. "I'm sure what Ron has told you about me might indicate I'd do more to perpetuate that myth, regardless of my fame, than end it."

Bill made a dismissive gesture when he saw Harry was going to speak ill of his youngest brother. "Ron's not *completely* brainless, but he acts like it at times. And he's quite impulsive. Whatever happened to you two First Year – and I don't need to know what it was – he's just determined to find reasons not to like you. It's all the more ironic because, while his admiration of you didn't stretch as far as Ginny's, he was just as eager to hear the 'Harry Potter story' from Dad."

Harry laughed. "It's really strange to contemplate that I was the subject of a bedtime story for wizards my own age."

Bill also chuckled. "That's something, isn't it? You don't seem too full of yourself, though. At least, not for that reason."

"I didn't do *anything*," Harry replied evenly. "My mother sacrificed her life for mine. The Killing Curse reflected and hit Voldemort. That's it. My mother did what hundreds of other mothers would have done, only she knew an old charm to make her death count for something. I have nothing to be proud of, and no credit to take for the outcome."

Bill didn't seem all that surprised. "Ginny told me this already," he said. "It's interesting to hear the way you put it though. I didn't actually

believe her at first, because I've never heard of such magic. But it apparently exists."

"I'm good at a lot of things," Harry told him, "and I take pride from the accomplishments that merit it. But nothing else. I am a fantastic Seeker, and that is not my arrogance speaking;, it's the truth, acknowledged by dozens of people. And I am proud of that." He didn't mention, of course, that his greatest feelings of pride and self-importance came from the knowledge of the power he wielded and the destiny he faced.

Bill nodded. "You and Hermione seem close."

Now Harry was getting irritated. "Is this an interrogation or something?"

Bill shrugged, ordering his queen to move across the board. "Check."

Harry studied the situation and responded by moving a castle to block the threat. "You didn't answer my question," he reminded him, a slight edge in his voice.

Bill shrugged his shoulders again. "It is whatever you make it to be. I'm just curious. Like I said, I'm not accusing you of anything. But I care about my little sister, and I'd like to get to know her friends. I've spent time with Hermione before, but I've never met you before yesterday."

"That doesn't explain why you are asking about my *relationships* with them," Harry countered.

"I'm asking because I find that how a person interacts with his friends, as well as his rivals, is an excellent indicator of his character," Bill explained. "If you don't want to talk about this, I'm fine with that. But I'm not going to end the conversation myself."

Harry's opinion of Bill was raised up another notch. He had a very sharp mind, and a burning suspicion about everything that he construed as pure curiosity. He disguised it so well that even Harry was beginning to question if Bill's motives were as sinister as he believed them to be. Well, maybe sinister wasn't the proper word. Bill

didn't wish him harm, but he didn't bestow trust easily. And that, in the kind of environment that the Wizarding world was, was a very good thing.

They continued their game, with the conversation turning more to schoolwork and discussions about Bill's unusual and fascinating vocation. Harry never did answer Bill's last question. He was willing to admit that he liked the eldest of the Weasley brothers, but that didn't mean he was ready to open his heart to him.

Daphne Artemis O'Connor Dressler stared into the roaring fire in one of the many sitting rooms in Dressler Manor. This one held particular significance to her. She hadn't been inside it for over fourteen years, as the amount of dust and cobwebs she'd needed to clean before the room was useable attested to. It was deep in the Eastern Wing of the manor, where Edmond's parents had lived.

It was also a place where she'd spent many nights with her fiancée and eventual husband before they'd purchased the small home where Edmond had been killed. It was a place that brought many memories. Mostly, they were happy memories, memories of the love and affection they'd felt for each other. Memories of the two of them lying to together, kissing, cuddling and doting on one another long into the night. She'd been able to forget all that had happened in her past; by his very presence, Edmond Dressler had taken away her fear, sorrow and misery. He knew exactly how to make her laugh.

Edmond had been more than kind and funny, however. He'd had a sharp mind, one that she'd expected might one day be put to use in politics. His knowledge of Pureblood customs and traditions was not as great as hers, but he knew more than enough to get by. In fact, he could not match her knowledge of spells, rituals and even magical history. But he could think outside the box, come up with inventive solutions while she refused to deviate from what she had been taught. And only with him had she ever said anything about her parents and their violent, senseless ends. She'd cried in his arms and he had comforted her in a way that Lily could not. Even in the midst of war, she felt as though she might be able to let go of her pain, to put it

behind her. Wrapped tightly in the arms of Edmond Dressler, she had finally been *free*.

And then fate had stolen him from her. She had slipped back, allowing her emotions to rule her decisions. She had fallen into Darkness, and very nearly been unable to escape it. Harry had brought her back to the Light. But, as frightened as she was to admit it, she had been close to reaching a point where she might have murdered Harry before even thinking of raising him.

And in the ten years they spent in Claw's Clan, as Harry grew into an intelligent boy, mature well beyond his years, she had finally been allowed to heal. She had rebuilt herself, mentally and magically, restoring the power that she had nearly willingly cast aside out of horror for what she had done and the atrocities that she had committed.

But she had not overcome her past as she had hoped. She had merely escaped it temporarily. And when she and Harry returned to England, it returned. The memories became ever-more powerful. She could feel herself slipping, but refused to believe it. She still felt she was doing the right thing. She still felt, to this day, despite what she had heard just eighteen hours ago, that while she had made mistakes, she had acted for the right reasons. And she still believed that she was capable of using the time she had left to train Harry into the leader and duelist he needed to be. But it came with a price...

She was dying.

She had suspected this. It was not as though it was entirely out of the blue. She knew that prolonged use of powerful Dark Magic corrupted not only the soul but the body. Voldemort would have destroyed himself if not for the rituals he performed that made him less than human. That gave him power and resilience beyond that of the most powerful wizards, while reducing his soul to a blackened hole, a vacuum that could only be fed by hatred and rage. She had not yet reached that point, and she was determined that she was not going to. She would let herself go, end her painful life before she sank to his level.

But she was not going to tell Harry. He had enough to deal with right now, and it wasn't as though she was going to drop dead a few days from now. Melinda had said she probably had well over a year before her body finally failed her. Before her power, blackened and corrupt, finally consumed her soul, and with it, her ability for conscious thought. *"But for the body to continue living,"* the old woman had said, *"the wizard or witch in question must desire to go on. Not merely desire, but to crave it in such a way that he or she willingly surrenders control of his or her body. And unless I am greatly mistaken, this is not something that you desire."*

She could *not* allow herself to doubt her decisions. For as Moody had taught her, a lifetime ago, that led to indecision and weakness. And she would never allow herself to be *weak*. No matter what she went through, no matter how close she was to breaking down and resting the tip of her wand against her temple, ready to end all of the pain and suffering, she would not allow it to happen. It was all that she had left.

"Why?" she asked the empty room, her voice dead and lifeless. "Why did you leave me, Edmond? Why were you taken from me?"

There was no response, and she had expected none. But the gaping void in her heart left by the death of the only person that truly understood her had yet to be filled. Harry had come close, but even he was now growing distant. And Daphne couldn't blame him. It wasn't simply that he *didn't* understand. It was that he *couldn't* understand. Only someone who had been through the repeated experiences of hell could understand. And Daphne was committed to ensuring that he never did understand. He had suffered enough, and she knew that his suffering was far from over. All she could do was keep him safe and prepare him for what was ahead.

There was no way to prepare a person for the loss of a loved one. The feelings associated with it were unique to each person, and could not be communicated with words.

Melinda Tucker had been a friend of her mother's. She'd never really been close to Daphne until she had sent a letter to the distraught girl one month after the atrocities committed at O'Connor Sanctuary.

Daphne occasionally exchanged letters with her, but there was a limit to how much the woman, who had lost both of her parents in the London Blitz of 1940, could help her.

After all, she was a *Muggle*.

It was unclear how Hester Logan had met Melinda, a woman born in the slums of London. Her family had managed to eventually get off the street and shelter the seven members of the family into a two-bedroom flat. But they had never possessed a great deal of wealth. It was also unclear how Melinda knew more about magic than any Muggle Daphne had ever met.

And it was also unclear how she appeared to possess powers beyond that of a non-magical human; yet Daphne detected no more magic within her than she did within Lily's obese brother-in-law, Vernon Dursley. But Daphne did not think she was a fraud, or that her supposed powers were a sham. Because unless Melinda was the best liar that ever existed, her Legilimancy scans told her that Melinda was completely sincere. She scanned her on multiple occasions, not the least of which was when, less than a day earlier, she'd placed one hand on Daphne's forehead, and another on her breast, directly above her heart, and told her, in a matter-of-fact tone, that she was dying. *You are now paying the price for what you have done, my dear*, she had said softly. *You have a darkness within you that is destroying you. You do not have long before it consumes you altogether.*

Somehow, Daphne had known without a Legilimancy scan that she was again telling the truth. And when she'd performed one, almost more out of habit than anything else, she'd confirmed it.

A lone tear slid down her right cheek, sliding down to her scarred chin before gravity took hold of it and it fell, staining the blue fabric of her robes. It was followed by another. And another. And another.

She wept openly, lying down and burying her face in a pillow on the couch she sat on. Her body was wracked with violent sobs as she tried to let all of the emotion she'd kept bottled up for so long out at once. She did not know how long she lay there, alone in a dark, cold

room with only a flickering fire to provide light and warmth. She did not care.

When it was over, she felt drained, physically, emotionally and mentally. She was freezing, and shivered in the suddenly frigid air of the room. She found a blanket folded over the edge of the couch and draped it over her body, pulling it tighter to her skin for warmth. She also felt dehydrated, and the skin on her face was damp and sore. She felt ashamed for a moment, but knew that was irrational and fought it. No one had seen her in this moment of weakness, and that was what mattered. She was strong and she would recover.

Or she would fail.

And she would *not* allow that to happen. Not again.

As she sat there, rebuilding herself, the fireplace abruptly flared green, the sign of a floo connection. Startled, she could feel heat coming to her cheeks as the face of Albus Dumbledore appeared in the flames. She knew she had to look a mess. The concern etched on his ancient face confirmed that. "Daphne? I didn't mean to interrupt anything? Are you alright?" Genuine concern was in his voice, but a part of Daphne hated his presence anyway. The last thing she desired was pity. Only the pathetic crave pity.

She shook her hair back over her shoulders, resisting the temptation to wipe at her eyes, and leveled her gaze at her old Headmaster. "What is it, Albus?" she asked, keeping her voice remarkably level and emotionless.

Dumbledore, to his credit, did not comment further on her appearance or the fact that she was obviously distraught about something. "I have a proposal for you," he said, all business now, though there was a slight twinkle in his eyes. "You will recall I have invited you to take up the post of Hogwarts' Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor in the past."

"Twice," she told him. "And my response has not changed. I am not ready for that kind of responsibility, nor will I ever be. And I would draw unwanted attention to you personally. As I've said before, I will not take on the responsibility of teaching students how to defend

themselves from the Dark Arts when I use them freely. It is hypocrisy of the worst kind. Demands for resignation would fill rooms. I am not well thought of, Albus, and I will not embarrass Hogwarts, you or Harry.”

Dumbledore sighed. “If it makes any difference, my second choice is Alastor Moody.”

That brought a weak smile to Daphne’s face, one which she exaggerated instinctively so that she appeared pleasantly surprised and perhaps even amused. “I see your point. But Moody’s allegiance to the Light goes unquestioned. Mine does not.”

“No one that knows you personally believes,,,” Dumbledore began

“*Don’t they?*” Daphne retorted angrily. “The whispers were there only months after I joined the Order, after the news of what I did to the McCourns circulated amongst those fighting the war. As a result, my mere presence inspired fear. On *both* sides. If I have not forgotten, then *surely* they have not. And I despise Severus Snape, and you *know* that, and *why*.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Daphne, we both know that there is no witch or wizard more qualified to teach Defense. I would like to make a...slightly altered proposal to you.”

Over the next few minutes, he explained his offer. And at the end, the fire of hope burning within her heart once again, she nodded. “I’ll do it. And I’ll keep your warnings in mind.”

Dumbledore gave her a grateful smile. “I am glad, Daphne. I will leave you in peace.” And with that, his image popped out of the fireplace, and the green flames receded into a few dying embers. Daphne got up, feeling weak and exhausted. Her thoughts immediately went to Harry, who would undoubtedly be returning soon. He *couldn’t* see her life this.

He couldn’t see her weakness. She regretted having to lie to him, to pretend that she would live to see his own children grow into adulthood. But she didn’t have a choice.

Another sob escaped her. She stumbled out of the darkened, deserted East Wing, into the main hall. "Floppy!" she called. Her faithful servant appeared with a crack.

"Yes, Ma'am?" the female elf replied. She might have called Dobby, but the elf was so excitable that he might say things he shouldn't, even if she ordered him to stay silent. Harry's suspicions could not be aroused in the least. Floppy, her oldest house-elf, was one of the most serene and thoughtful she'd ever encountered. She was subservient, but not overly so. She knew her place in life, but she did not fall over herself trying to please.

"Floppy, when Harry arrives...if he ask where I am, tell him that I retired early," she instructed.

The observant house-elf frowned slightly. "Is the Mistress well?" she asked cautiously.

"No," she told her. "But Harry is to believe that I am. Do you understand?"

"Of course, Mistress. He will suspect nothing."

Daphne smiled, a genuine smile this time. "I highly doubt that. But I know that you will not further his suspicions."

The house-elf bowed and vanished, presumably back to the kitchens. Daphne headed up the grand marble staircase to the second floor. She silently walked into her room, then into her bathroom. She stripped out of her robe and bathed, trying to find a way to relax. Her muscles found a way, but her mind remained restless. She got out of her bath, donned a silk bath robe, and lay down upon the bed she'd spent more than one night in with her late husband. It was one of the few reminders of him that she could stand, though she didn't understand why. She stretched out on the bed, trying to calm her fluttering heart.

Sleep did not come easily. And when it did, so did nightmares.

It was the same one. Countless time that night, she dreamt of staring down at the lifeless face of that helpless, painfully-innocent, teenaged Death Eater.

Harry spent the rest of the day with the Weasleys, catching up with his two best friends. Ginny's family made him feel at home, and the dinner prepared by Mrs. Weasley was amazing. Harry stayed long enough to say goodbye to each of the Weasleys (with the exception of Ron and Percy, who made it a point to be nowhere near him, of course.) Harry was pleasantly surprised when Bill asked him to write to him in Egypt about what was happening at Hogwarts.

Indeed, this and a number of other clues left Harry convinced that something remarkable would be happening at the Wizarding school this year. Percy, arrogant and pompous as usual, was deliberately flaunting his knowledge (attained by his higher placement in the Ministry then even his father) to his family. It was irritating and obnoxious in the eyes of Ginny, and Harry tended to agree. Percy had once struck him as professional, but he was now as bad as any stuck-up Pureblood that Harry had ever encountered. Worse, he seemed to regret being a part of such a 'common' family, and the disrespect that he encountered blocked his path to advancement. He detested what the Weasley name carried with it. He was beginning down a slippery slope, Harry could tell. This could end very badly. Needless to say, he didn't trust Harry at all, and it had nothing to do with Ron.

With school only a week away, Harry, Ginny and Hermione planned to meet up in Diagon Alley the next day to buy their school supplies. Harry said his final goodbyes to his friends and threw a pinch of floo powder into the fireplace. With a bellowed "Dressler Manor!" he was gone. He managed to depart the floo network with a great deal more grace than he had in the past, stumbling but not falling over flat onto his face. He called out for his guardian, whom he expected would still be awake. It was dark outside, but it was not yet ten o'clock.

Instead of his guardian, a pink-skinned house-elf, Floppy, appeared before him. Floppy was Daphne's favorite elf. "Master Harry Potter? Mistress Dressler has retired for the night. Floppy would like to

humbly ask you to not speak so loudly.” The degree of independence and nerve shown by the elf was unusual, yet she was not as excitable as Dobby. She was gentle, kind, considerate and quiet. A perfect servant in every way, unless you were some kind of control freak. Harry frowned though at the explanation of where his guardian was. Daphne didn’t tire easily, and was regularly up past midnight, reading.

“Is she ill?” Harry asked.

Floppy shook her head. “No, sir. But she told me that she felt fatigued and wished to rest. I expect that she will speak with you in the morning. Is there anything I can get for you, Master?”

Harry waved her off. “No thanks, I’m fine. I ate at the Weasleys.”

Floppy nodded and vanished with a soft crack of displaced air, leaving Harry alone in the main sitting room. Once he was alone, he again frowned. *If she’s not ill, than why has she gone to bed this early?* He wondered. Realizing that his thoughts would get him nowhere, he headed into the Dressler Family Library, intent on finding a reference to a book that Bill had mentioned as an excellent source on Goblin history. He’d specifically praised the way it dealt with civil wars in their race. It had actually been written by a wizard would had befriended a group of Goblins as a child, and when his parents died, had spent the remainder of his life in the tunnels, studying and recording. He was widely shunned because he’d chosen to live with *inferior* creatures, hence the rarity of his book.

He didn’t find the book itself, unfortunately, but after an hour of searching he had the name of the author and the date it was published. There were a number of rare book stores on Diagon Alley, and one might have it or be able to obtain a copy. *My Life in the Tunnels*, it was titled, by *William Miner*, published first in 1832. Pleased, he spent the next hour reading a book that provided an overview of Pureblood rituals, Light and Dark.

When he returned to the house after his morning run, he saw Daphne sitting at the dining room table, one leg lazily crossed over the other, reading the *Prophet*. She lowered the paper and looked up at him. “Good morning, Harry. Everything went well this morning, I hope?”

Harry nodded. He'd stretched thoroughly before running. He wasn't going to repeat that mistake. "Are you feeling better?" he asked. "Floppy wasn't sure why you'd gone to bed early." It was a bit of a lie, but he sensed that the house-elf had been somewhat deceptive. Floppy was loyal to her family, first and foremost, and by blood that family did not include Harry. It was thus possible for her to lie to him.

Daphne's eyes showed a flicker of surprise. "Yes," she said, also lying. "I felt a bit under the weather and managed to sleep it off. Your visit to the Burrow went well?"

Harry nodded, sitting down at the table a few seats away from her. Instantly, a tray of breakfast food appeared. That meant Dobby was making breakfast today; keeping the table spotless until absolutely necessary was one of the former Malfoy servant's favorite little tricks. He buttered some toast, and then realized he hadn't responded to Daphne's question. "Sorry," he said. "Yes, it went well. I got to know Bill Weasley, Ginny's oldest brother. He works for Gringotts in Egypt as a Curse Breaker."

Daphne whistled, obviously impressed. "That's one of the most difficult occupations there is. You need an advanced understanding of languages, both of wizards and the tongues of magical creatures, in addition to exceptional skill at Charms, Transfiguration and Defense. Being accepted into that program is even tougher than being accepted into the Unspeakables. And it makes Auror training look lazy by comparison. They are remarkably underpaid for the amount of danger they place themselves in. Some of those Ancient Egyptian curses are nasty."

Harry was a bit surprised by Daphne's praise. "You never considered it as a career option?" he asked.

Daphne shook her head. "I was *always* going to be an Auror. There was never the slightest doubt in my mind. I *might* have been a Ministry Hit-Wizard if they allowed witches my age to join. It probably wasn't for the best anyway. I don't hesitate to use Dark Magic in pursuit of my goals, but I don't relish it. I've always looked at them as Death Eaters on the Ministry's payroll. That's why they were disbanded after the end of the war."

Harry nodded. The Hit-Wizards had, predictably, killed and maimed many people whose connection to Voldemort was non-existent or based on evidence that was shaky at best. They had been an embarrassment, and one of Fudge's campaign promises had been to break up the band of Ministry-paid terrorists. It had been one of the few he'd followed through on. Others had included ending corruption in the Ministry. As Daphne would attest, the Ministry had probably never been *more* corrupt, more under the thumb of the Pureblood Council. "He told me to stay in contact with him," Harry explained.

Daphne shrugged. "I don't see why not. I'm sure you could learn a great deal from him. And if he possesses most of the traits that typify the Weasley family, he's a wand that I'd trust at my back."

Harry nodded, draining a large part of his orange juice. "I told Ginny and Hermione that I'd meet them in Diagon Alley. Would you mind if I went alone?"

Daphne's face tightened. "I'm not thrilled by the idea. You have a tendency to attract the wrong kind of attention."

"I can handle myself," he assured her. "There's no need for you to come unless you want to."

Daphne considered that for a moment. "Fine. Just be back before six. And wear your ring. I've noticed you haven't put it on the entire Summer. I realize it might be embarrassing or irritating to rely on me for protection, but I'm not willing to take any chances I don't have to." She fixed him with a hard gaze. "You know why."

Harry nodded. "When and where are you meeting them?" she asked.

"Eleven o'clock at the Leaky Cauldron. I think the whole Weasley family will be there, but Hermione's coming alone. After what happened two years ago, she doesn't want her parents to see more of the Wizarding world's uglier side," he explained. "I'll be careful, I promise. We could train before I leave," he suggested.

Daphne nodded. "I have a curse I'd like to begin with you. It's dangerous, and quite difficult to master."

“Is it Dark?” Harry asked. He didn’t care either way, of course. Harry, like his guardian, subscribed to the theory that it wasn’t the nature of a spell that made it Light or Dark, it was the way in which it was used. A Stunning Spell could easily kill if it was cast with a wand placed against the victim’s temple. Even a Cutting Charm could kill if the wand tip was placed against the victim’s jugular. Spells classified by the Ministry as Light were merely that. The Slicing Curse was one of the first combat curses that an Auror learned, and it had been classified as Dark for over a century.

Daphne nodded in response to his question. “It’s called the Compression Curse. It’s a very powerful, very advanced spell. It literally pushes down on whatever area of a target’s body that it hits with enough force to break bones. At the very least, it causes severe pain, hairline fractures, and painful and deep bruising. Aimed at the head, it will almost always be fatal. I’m showing a great deal of trust in you by teaching it. Even Aurors are *advised* not to use it. It’s extremely difficult to block, because it will exert enough force to break even the stoutest shield.”

Harry finished his breakfast, and then both of them headed for the training room. After some warm-up exercises and conditioning drills, Daphne demonstrated the new spell. Her first Compression Curse cracked the plaster target in half. The second, much more powerful reduced both pieces to a fine powder. The implications for the effects on a human being were obvious. They weren’t messing around anymore.

Harry wasn’t even able to master the wrist movements before he had to leave, but even this brief experience had awakened something within him. He was beginning to come to a chilling realization. He was learning spells that were often fatal.

Daphne was teaching him how to kill.

Harry arrived at the Leaky Cauldron thirty minutes before he’d arranged to meet with his friends and set off for Gringotts to refill his money bag with the gold in the vault his parents had left for him. He gathered enough gold to last the year and cast Shrinking and

Lightening charms on it to make it easier to carry. He had no fear of Ministry detection, the amount of magic being used every second on Diagon Alley and the rest of the hidden shopping district were even more effective at shielding him than the pulsating wards of Dressler Manor. The Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry had been created for one purpose: to prevent Muggle-born witches and wizards from using their powers in the sight of common Muggles. There was never any expectation that it would curb the use of magic by Pureblood children, or anyone that lived in a Wizarding household. It was conveniently expected that the adults of each family would enforce those rules.

He nodded to Griphook, who was sitting at his usual station, measuring gold, but he got no response from his account manager. Apparently, the goblins didn't have anything to tell him this time. Heading back to the Leaky Cauldron at a leisurely pace, Harry wore a hooded cloak, appropriate for once, as the weather was unseasonably cold. He was hardly the only one wearing something extra over his robes.

When he got back, his friends still hadn't arrived. Harry used some of the money he'd retrieved to pay for a glass of butterbeer while he waited. It wasn't as flavorful as the stuff he'd had the very first time he'd gone to Hogwarts, but it was quite good nonetheless. Finally, Hermione appeared at the entrance to the pub, wearing a red Gryffindor scarf and a thick sweater, complete with a cloak. She beamed as she saw him sitting across the room, and ran over to him. "How are you doing?" she asked. "Ginny's not here yet? It's already fifteen minutes to noon! I'm sorry I was late, by the way. My parents got lost driving through downtown London."

"I'm sure it wasn't helped by the fact that you were the only one who could see the Leaky Cauldron," Harry remarked.

She nodded. "Anyway, have you seen our book lists for this year? It sounds like we've got some kind of ex-Auror for a Defense teacher. He's assigned some pretty intense material, definitely not the standard textbook for Fourth Years. Let's just hope he's as good as Lupin. Have you heard from him this summer?" she asked.

Harry frowned. "I got a letter from him just two weeks after we got back, and sent a reply. But I haven't heard from him since. Daphne doesn't seem concerned. I did get a birthday present from Sirius, though. A pocketknife charmed to be a combination ultimate lock-pick and knot-untangler. Useful little thing, really. He didn't mention Moony."

Hermione sighed. "I was hoping you just hadn't mentioned him for some reason. I was hoping that we might be able to keep in touch. I certainly learned more from him than either of the other two."

"You really liked him, didn't you?"

She nodded. "We had a lot in common, both being quite the bookworm...well, at least when he was young. Add in the fact that he was a friend of your parents, and trying pretty hard to be your friend, and I'm going to miss him. I still don't really understand why he left."

"He told me that he was just getting tired of hiding his condition, and that he didn't want to slip up and be found out or to have Snape betray him. He wanted to go out on his own terms. I also think he was still shaken by his fight with Greyback. He felt something that night that terrified him. That's why he had to leave."

Hermione looked away, towards the fire. "It just isn't fair."

"I know," Harry told her. "Few bad things are."

As he said this, the fire flared green, and five Weasleys emerged. Ginny dusted herself off and ran over to join them. "Sorry. Mum caught Fred and George with a bag of joke products, and spent a bunch of time confiscating the whole lot. It took a while."

Harry smiled. "Do you need to go get some money at Gringotts?" he asked.

Ginny shook her head. "No, Dad went to the bank yesterday. We have a little more this year because they compensated Dad for the amount of overtime work he had to do during the search for Sirius and for the backlash for the security failures at the World Cup. Half

the Wizarding world is claiming damages of some amount or another. Where to first?" she asked, breathlessly.

Harry shrugged. "Your mother knows that you're coming with us?" he asked. It was probably a good idea to make sure he didn't end up on the receiving end of one of Mrs. Weasley's fits. Ginny's mother was rather protective of her.

Ginny nodded. "Yeah, she just told me to stay away from Knockturn Alley. I've got enough gold to get my school supplies and my robes. Mum sent one of her old dress robes to Madam Malkins to get it cleaned and repaired. It should look pretty nice when it's all done."

Harry frowned. "Dress robes?"

"Of course, didn't you see it listed in the school supplies?" Hermione asked. "I looked it up, and it said that wizards only wear those for formal occasions. Maybe we're having some kind of school dance or something like that. I've never heard of it happening before at Hogwarts."

"I might need you two to give me an idea as to what looks nice," Harry told them. "I haven't the slightest clue when it comes to clothing," he admitted.

"Sure," Hermione said. "I don't claim to be any kind of expert, but I'm sure we can figure something out. Why don't we go to Flourish and Blotts first? It's closest."

They agreed and headed out of the Leaky Cauldron onto the busy streets of Diagon Alley. Harry had lowered the hood of his cloak, but he kept his hair covering his scar to avoid anyone recognizing him. He wasn't in the mood to deal with people pointing and staring at him. They went into the bookstore and headed for the front desk. Harry got his letter out of the pocket of his robes and found the list of schoolbooks he would need. Ginny asked for and was shown the collection of second-hand textbooks, which were considerably cheaper. She didn't seem embarrassed by it, and Harry was relieved. While the clerk found their schoolbooks, Harry and Hermione began searching the shelves for interesting reading material. Harry browsed through the Quidditch Section, but didn't see anyone he was

particularly interested in. He was scanning the titles of dueling manuals when he *felt* her standing behind him. "Hello Luna," he said quietly, turning to face her.

Sure enough, Luna Lovegood stood there, butterbeer cap necklace and all, her wand casually sticking out from behind her right ear. Her black blue eyes stared back at him. "You've changed," she said simply. "You feel different. More powerful," she elaborated. But she said nothing further.

"What do you want?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I don't really *want* anything. I expect it's the other way around. Wasn't my letter *interesting*?" she asked, emphasizing the last word, then waiting patiently for a response.

Harry shrugged. "I have no idea. I couldn't understand a bloody word of it."

"That's too bad," Luna said, sounding slightly disappointed. "I'd hoped you might be able to figure out what it means. I'll give you a hint: the words themselves don't mean that much at all. Looking for meaning in each line is like searching for Nargles under a person's toe. But taken as a whole, they mean something."

"I still don't understand," Harry told her. "You're telling me that each word is in itself meaningless, but all of them together carry a message? How?"

"You aren't thinking the right way. You are thinking *logically*. I *never* think logically." Somehow, that didn't exactly surprise Harry.

"So how do you want me to think?" he asked.

She shook her head. "It's not what *I* want. It's about what *you* want. I understand the message and its importance. *You* are the one that doesn't get it." She blinked repeatedly as she spoke. It was quite disorienting.

"What do you-" he began, but Hermione's voice cut him off.

“Harry? Where do you go? Oh, there you are. Hi Luna. What are you two doing over here?” she asked, frowning in confusion.

“Discussing matters of great importance,” Luna said simply. “We’re done now. Bye.” And with that, she skipped out of sight. Harry stared at the spot where she had been standing. Most of their meetings seemed to end like this.

“She’s quite a queer girl, isn’t she?” Hermione said, startling him. He turned to face her.

“Yeah, she’s something, isn’t she? I just can’t understand what she means half the time,” he admitted. He didn’t mention that Luna had claimed responsibility for a nightmare that had forced him to reconsider everything he had been doing relating to the building of alliances. “She’s no normal witch. But I can’t figure out what she is.”

Hermione frowned. But before she could speak, Ginny found them. “I’ve got everything I need. Most of the stuff’s in pretty good shape, too. All of your schoolbooks are up front,” she said, obviously unaware of the conversation she’d interrupted.

Hermione, to Harry’s relief, decided not to continue their discussion. Harry, finding nothing that particularly interested him, decided he’d visit the second-hand bookstore a few shops down Knockturn Alley. He’d never actually been there before, but that had been where Daphne had purchased the rare dueling manuals that she’d given him for his birthday. She’d told him the place was a bit dodgy, and a number of the books were illegal, but that it might be the best place to find Goblin literature, at least in London. If he wasn’t stupid, he wouldn’t be in any danger from the lowlifes that prowled the alley. A Bludgeoning Curse to the face, and a potential mugger falling unconscious to the street would send a message that he was not to be trifled with, and that this little boy packed a punch. Hopefully, no one would recognize him. He would wait until he’d left Ginny and Hermione, of course.

They proceeded next to the Apothecary and picked up all of the potions supplies they would need. Snape had sent Harry a supplemental list, indicating that they were going to continue the extra potions lessons with Moon. Hermione took a great deal of care to

insure they had everything that was on the list in amounts slightly larger than those required. Bags laden with newt eyes, knotgrass, a tub of flobberworm mucus and the like, they headed to Scribbulus Everchanging Inks, where they each purchased a set of new quills, ink bottles, and plenty of parchment for the upcoming term. Hermione wasn't particularly pleased when Harry absent-mindedly shrank and lightened everything they had purchased in the middle of the store, and even less pleased when no one seemed to notice or care. Anyone with one good eye could tell that Harry was underage.

Next, they went into Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions. Harry waited patiently as Hermione was fitted for her new school robes, while Ginny was browsing through a collection of second-hand robes. He walked over to her. "You know, I could give you my old robes. I still have the ones from First and Second Year, and I'm not going to need them. They are in pretty good shape. I realize that your family isn't fond of charity, but I don't really think of it that way."

Ginny looked conflicted. "I suppose. I'd love to have them, but I'm not sure what my family would think."

"Think of it as a birthday present," Harry suggested. "I was planning to get you something Quidditch-related when we went into that store, but if you want to, I can mail my robes to you instead. I wouldn't have a problem doing both, but I just wanted to be sensitive."

Ginny gave him a wry smile. "Am I supposed to believe that you had *planned* to get me something today? Are you sure you just didn't *forget* my birthday?"

Harry winced, turning slightly red. "I did send you a birthday note," he pointed out.

"Two weeks later," Ginny added. "Don't worry, I realize how busy that you were. To be perfectly honest, I'll take the robes. I'll get more use out of them, and my parents said that I could get a decent broom if I can make the Quidditch team this year. Maybe one of the new Shooting Stars."

"That's great," Harry told her, happy for his friend. "I don't actually *have* the Firebolt anymore. It's a long story," he added.

"There's a long story about how you lost a *Firebolt*?" she asked in disbelief.

"Daphne, well, *forcibly* returned it to Sirius," he whispered. "She was angry at him for kidnapping me and trying to take me away from her, and didn't want me to own anything that was his." He shrugged. "She didn't say anything about the knife, so she might let me take it back at some point."

Ginny frowned, but before Harry could ask, Hermione was finished. It took much less time for Harry to be fitted, and he soon had an entire set of school robes. He was reaching into his money bag to pay for them when Ginny whispered. "Uh, Harry...*dress robes*, remember?"

"Right," Harry said. "What do you have in that department?" he asked the owner of the store. She led the three of them into another room with much more formal wear. Harry's eyes were drawn to a number of different robes, but he'd be lying to himself if he pretended that he had the slightest clue what he was doing. He focused on an emerald green robe of a conservative cut that seemed to match his eyes.

"Good choice," Ginny told him, eyeing the robe he was looking at. On closer examination, it was a shade of bottle green. To his remarkably untrained eye, it looked pretty handsome. "It matches your eyes," she added. "And your House color. I think you found what you were looking for." Hermione glanced over and nodded in approval.

"Could I see that?" he asked, pointing at the robe in question. Madam Malkin walked over and retrieved the robe.

"It's in the middle price range," she told him. "Good quality fabric, should last a while. Of course, you'll probably outgrow it. There are some changing rooms over there, she said, pointing to an open doorway. I can make any adjustments you need."

Harry tried on the robes, and to his relief, they fit perfectly, though they felt somewhat awkward. Nonetheless, he was sold, and wasn't planning to question his decision. If Hermione and Ginny approved, he wasn't going to disagree with them. He changed back into his black robes and folded the green ones neatly. "How much?" he asked as he approached the tall women that owned the store. She named a

figure. Like she had said, these weren't expensive, but they certainly weren't cheap. He paid for his robes and waited patiently for Hermione her purchase. He stared out the windows of the store, looking for familiar faces, but didn't see any. Hermione didn't take that much time. In the end, Hermione bought the blue robes she had been scrutinizing.

With that arduous mission finally accomplished, they headed back to the Leaky Cauldron for a late lunch. They ate and talked about the upcoming year. Ginny wanted to hear everything she could about what Third-Year exams were like. Harry also learned that Ginny had selected the same electives as he had: Ancient Runes and Care of Magical Creatures. She admitted she was "bloody awful with numbers" as a justification for not taking Arithmacy,

After lunch, Hermione told them she was going to see Ollivander. She said that she'd done some reading on security features for wands, and found a spell that, if properly performed, would allow only the registered owner of a wand to cast spells with it. She admitted she was a bit embarrassed that she'd managed to lose her wand and that someone had used it to cast the Dark Mark. Harry thought she was overreacting. While she did that, Harry and Ginny went into Quality Quidditch Supplies. Harry bought some new padded leg guards, as his were rapidly wearing out. Ginny didn't buy anything, though she spent a long time examining some of the more mid-price range brooms of the Comet and Shooting Star brands.

They eventually met up with Hermione, but by then, it was mid-afternoon, and Ginny thought it best that she go so as not to worry her mother. Hermione offered to stay with him for the rest of the day, but he declined, telling her that Daphne wanted him to come home early for some training. He was lying, but it was enough to convince her to leave. She said she could use a telephone booth to call her parents, but that she planned to browse a Muggle bookstore that was about a block from the entrance to Diagon Alley. She assured him that she was more than capable of taking care of herself in the meantime.

Harry was grateful for her departure because it finally gave him a chance to explore the used bookstore on the corner of Knockturn Alley. He put his hood up to avoid detection, and casually slipped into the darkened street. By contrast to the bright and relatively clean area that made up Diagon Alley, Knockturn Alley was a cesspit. The paving stones were dirty and covered with decades of mud and grime. The place had a noticeable foul odor about it, possibly coming from the many hunched witches and wizards dressed in filthy, ragged robes. It was not just a rumor that human body parts were sold here on the streets. Few ventured far down the alley alone. Fortunately, Harry's destination was only a few buildings in. Keeping his senses sharp and making sure to be completely aware of his surroundings, Harry slowly began walking towards the entrance of the second-hand bookstore. The windows, like every surface in Knockturn, were covered with grime and probably hadn't been cleaned in years. The door was very old, and creaked loudly when he pushed it open. He walked into the store.

"Can I help you with something?" a raspy voice said, sounding none-too-friendly.

Harry turned to face the owner of the bookstore. The wizard was old, and wearing patched and frayed robes. One of his eyes was missing, replaced with a patch, and he walked with a noticeable limp. "I'm looking for information about Goblins," he told the man.

He smiled, revealing a mouth full of yellow teeth. "Hope you didn't come all the way here for a school project," he said. "My name is Cheevers. And you are?"

Harry smiled thinly. "That," he said, "is something I'd prefer to keep to myself. But my mother is a customer of yours," he added. Using the term *guardian* might be a giveaway, depending on how sharp the old man was. *Better not to take chances*, Harry thought.

"A wise choice," the old man rasped. "I suppose you'll be after some of the, shall we say...*authentic* stuff. Nothing sponsored by the bloody Ministry?"

"You are correct."

The man nodded and walked towards him, picking up a gnarled cane as he did so. He smelled bad, too. "Now what would a boy such as yourself need that for?" he asked.

Harry met his gaze. "You don't need to know that. I'll pay you plenty, but I want to see the merchandise first."

The man nodded again, and gestured toward the back of the store. Harry followed the limping man cautiously, senses searching for any sign of danger. He found nothing. The man pointed his cane at a collection of worn, leather-bound books. "That's what you want. Complete collection of William Miner. Very rare. But he's the best there ever was."

"I'll bet," Harry said under his breath. "He lived with them for decades after all."

Apparently, the man's hearing wasn't bad at all, despite his advanced age. "You do know your stuff then. Yep, he was the best. Ministry hated him for making Goblins look like something better than the savages they were said to be. Me? I think the truth lies somewhere in between. But that doesn't mean the facts in those books aren't accurate. You looking for a specific one or the whole set?"

"I'll take the whole set," Harry said. "How much?"

The man thought for a moment, then named the price. It wasn't cheap, to say the least. "I don't have enough right now," he said.

"On your person or in your vault? I'm not giving you those books until you pay for them in full. And you have competition. A very influential individual wants them, but I'd rather they go to a curious kid like yourself than be condemned to eternally rot untouched on the shelves of some Pureblood family's library," he said.

"I don't have that much on me. I can give you my vault number," Harry told him.

The man nodded. "That'll do. What vault?"

Harry held up a hand. "I'd like to examine the contents briefly. Say, twenty minutes? I don't want to spend this kind of money and find out that they are different editions of the same work."

The man smiled. "You're sharp for someone your age. I assure you they are all quite different, but I'll give you twenty minutes. But if you damage them in any way, you are paying for the set in full. Deal?"

"Deal," Harry said. "I'll just use that chair to read in, if you don't mind."

Harry spent the next twenty minutes carefully sampling the content of each book. As promised, the set was of six completely unique books, each published during the late 19th century. To say they were delicate was an understatement. He was holding pieces of history. And he could tell that he'd learn more about Goblin society and history from these books than he would ever learn from anything he could find in the Hogwarts Library, Restricted Section or not.

He got up, and carefully slid the books back into the equally tattered case. As he rose, another title caught his eye: *Inside the Dark Arts* by Aiden Greengrass. Daphne hadn't been joking when she said he was an acknowledged expert.

"You there," an extremely familiar, arrogant voice spoke. "What do you think you are doing with *my* books?" If the voice hadn't tipped him off, the sound of two pairs of pounding footsteps would have told him it was one of the two living male Malfoys, accompanied by the respective generation of their lackeys.

Harry smiled. "I wasn't aware that you had already purchased them, Draco." It was clear that he didn't recognize Harry with his back turned and hood up. But the use of the Malfoy heir's first name provoked a startled exhale of breath.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "Turn around!"

On cue, Harry spun around on the sole of his trainer, grinning at his classmate. "Guess," he said, but leaving his wand arm hanging loosely at his side, ready to snap into action. He didn't want to fight, but he wanted these books. And he was going to get them, one way or another.

Malfoy spluttered, jerking back. His look of surprise turned to one of anger. "*Potter!*" he snarled. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Purchasing a set of antique books about Goblins that I've been unable to find any where else. It's a research project of mine," he told the furious boy. "And if I have to wipe the floor with all three of you, I will. And I can."

"We'll see about that-" Draco began, but another voice interrupted him. One which Harry recognized instantly and one that sent a chill through his body.

"It would be most counterproductive to start a fight here, Draco," the soft voice of Lucius Malfoy said. "Ah, what do we have here? Well, what are the odds of that? Harry Potter, the hero of the Light, standing in the middle of a store full of banned literature. Apparently, you aren't the little Golden Boy everyone makes you out to be. Perhaps you should leave, Potter, and leave this to the grown-ups." Malfoy sniggered at his father's tone, expecting to see Harry intimidated. He was disappointed.

Harry allowed the look of surprise to slide from his face and set his jaw in a determined expression. "What a pleasant reunion," he commented. "Sadly, Malfoy, I can't *pay* to have my reputation changed."

It was a rather lame insult, and both of them knew it. "Nothing will ever be proven, Potter," he said lightly. "As far as the Wizarding world knows, I was placed under the Imperious Curse and forced to perform acts of terror and murder for the servants of Lord Voldemort."

"Of course," Harry replied. "How are your bruises, Mr. Malfoy? You took quite a spill at the Cup."

That shattered the seemingly rock-solid composure of the elder Malfoy. "*You*," he hissed. "It was *you*! Where have you gained such power?" he demanded, his face paler than usual. "You will pay, Potter. When the Dark Lord rises again, I will gleefully watch as he personally and permanently wipes the Potter stain from the earth." Lucius' voice was cold and vicious. Harry didn't allow his fear to show on his face.

“Are you just planning to threaten me? Or will you let me go on my way?”

Lucius smiled coldly. “In due time, Potter. First, you will hand over those books. Then, perhaps, I might release you.”

“Surely you jest,” Harry said. “Unless you want Daphne to take out her grief and rage on your son, I’d recommend that you don’t attempt to harm me. I wouldn’t want to destroy these books any way. Or to deal with any of the paperwork relating to your corpse.” Harry wasn’t sure why he was saying these things, but he felt his magic flowing through his body, lifting his confidence to new heights. *He* was in control here. And his threat was *very* real. Daphne had sworn a Vow of Vengeance, and if she did not fulfill her end of the bargain, she would lose her magic. Not that she needed such an excuse to blast Lucius Malfoy into fragments, of course.

He tried to reign in his aggression, to prevent this situation from getting out of hand. Even if he could win, of which he was not convinced, the problems that would result would far outweigh any satisfaction he might have for beating one of Voldemort’s best. And Daphne seemed legitimately concerned about his intentional overcharging of spells. She wouldn’t be that concerned if there was not a *very* good reason for it.

Lucius was probably thinking the same thing. “I believe,” he said, “we have reached a stalemate. You may go Potter, and take those filthy tomes with you. But I will *not* forget this.”

“I wouldn’t expect any less,” Harry said, an equal chill in his voice. He whispered a Lightening Charm (he’d drawn his wand when he’d first heard Lucius, hiding it beneath the sleeve of his robes) and picked up the set. His eyes locked with Lucius’s, and he didn’t break eye contact until the last minute. He went up to the front of the store and wrote down his vault number to complete the transaction.

Slipping the hood of his cloak back on, Harry left Knockturn Alley. This was one incident he wasn’t planning to tell Daphne about.

A/N: Whew, that was a long one, full of the tragic, the amusing, and the downright bizarre.

Draco Malfoy is many things, but he is not a person with a short memory. Nor is his father. The clash between Harry and Draco for control of their class will be an important theme of this book.

If you thought Daphne's situation couldn't get worse, think again. Melinda Tucker is another one of those intriguing characters that I kind of made up on a whim. I found the idea of Daphne submitting to the judgement of another, especially a Muggle, to be quite fitting. She's isn't a sham, but she isn't a witch capable of hiding her powers either. She's like Luna; something that has no real designation or classification.

This whole Goblins thing might seem extremely pointless right now, but I assure you that it isn't.

I like Bill. Expect to see more of him.

What did Dumbledore offer to Daphne? You'll find out, but I'm not talking about it now. Feel free to speculate.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter 4: Friends

*...and I can only hope that my work finds its way into the hands of those that can use it for the betterment of Goblins and Wizards. Both have deeply ingrained stereotypes of the other, and in both cases, these stereotypes are misguided. Merely examining nomenclature can show us the differences. Wizards are taught the history of the Goblin **rebellions** or **revolts**. But Goblin history texts refer to them as **protests** and, in more extreme cases, **battles**. For to them, the latter implies that there were at least two opposing forces, and that those forces made up of equals. But the term 'rebellion' implies disobedience, and demonstrates that wizards have always felt they had a right to subjugate all non-wizards. The truth, as always, lies somewhere in between. Goblins are not all monsters of the dark, but they have engaged in acts of murder and torture to achieve their goals. Theirs is a ruthless, sometimes cut-throat society of constant competition. But they are not savages. They are an intelligent and cultured people who honor their ancestors and value courage and loyalty, if not honesty. But can I honestly say that the patriarchs of the great pureblood families are different? They are not as unlike us as people wish to believe.*

- William Miner, 1871

Harry finished the introduction to the first book in the collection he'd nearly fought a battle to obtain. It was obvious that William Miner was a brilliant individual, but a devious one at the same time. He had been raised alongside Goblins, some might even say *by* Goblins, and he had a significant bias. He attempted, like any good historian, to try to examine the facts objectively, but in his case it was a losing battle. Yet his bias was not blatant or heavy-handed. It was subtle, woven into the words he used and the ways in which he used them. Harry knew he could learn a great deal from this collection, but he needed to be cautious. He carefully closed the antique tome and gently set it on his night stand. The rest of the collection was now stored in the shelves across his room. Daphne had been impressed by his find, and told him that she intended to read the books herself.

Harry shifted in his bed, drawing the bedcovers closer to him. He reached out and turned off the light, the bulb run by nothing but

magical power. The American inventor Thomas Edison, a squib, had not forgotten about his progenitor's kind, and had managed to create devices that used magical energy and devices that used electrical energy. Later, other Muggles had refined his invention, but the magical power system remained unchanged. It drew on the power of the wards that originated from the magical stones embedded in the foundation of all magical dwellings for the last few centuries. Some witches and wizards still preferred lanterns, candles, and oil lamps. The Dresslers had no technological phobia.

He turned over, lying on his side, and drifted into sleep.

The man was wearing a hooded cloak and his face was hidden by shadow. He was tall, slim, and spoke in a voice with harsh tones. He stood in a well-furnished room, complete with antique paintings hanging from the walls and polished wooden furniture all around the room. On the floor were a pair of Persian rugs, and the room was brightly lit by electrical lamps. "Our preparations are complete," he said.

He spoke to what appeared to be a high-backed swiveling chair which hid the person sitting in it from view. Harry tried to move and get a look at the person occupying it, but he was frozen, almost like a video camera mounted on the wall. Something strange suddenly flickered in his view, but he couldn't tell what it was. He focused on the conversation, and felt his scar begin to burn dimly.

"I will make my move tomorrow. The old man won't know what hit him. And I visited your little project. She's ready."

"Excellent," a high, cold voice rasped. A chillingly familiar voice. "The spells?"

"Once we knew where to look, there wasn't a problem. Even Dumbledore won't know."

"Good," Lord Voldemort said. "On to other matters...we have made contact?"

The man nodded. "They'll be out in a few months. The guards have returned to their rightful master.

"Where is Wormtail?" Voldemort suddenly snapped. The man pointed to his right.

"I am here, Master," came a frightened whimper. Harry looked over to see the pathetic betrayer of his parents emerging from a darkened doorway. Peter had lost weight, yet still appeared rotund and rodent-like. He also looked like he hadn't bathed in a week. "I am sorry. I went to check the perimeter. We don't want any Muggles prowling about-

There was a loud, angry hiss from somewhere very near him, and Voldemort echoed it. "Idiot!" he snapped. "Silence! We are not alone..."

Harry suddenly realized that Voldemort knew full well that he was here. "Harry Potter," he said slowly. "You are bold, Half-blood. But also foolish. For by entering my mind, you have left your own open!" He screeched the last word, and Harry tried to recoil back into him, yanking himself out of Voldemort's mind.

He succeeded, but it was too late. Pain enveloped him, a blanket of agony crushing down on his body, smothering him. He felt as though his scar was going to burst open. He launched waves of magic through the mental link, and knocked Voldemort free. But the pain remained.

He screamed. And then everything went black.

Something cold and wet slid across his burning forehead and he moaned. "Shhhhh," Daphne whispered. She placed the wet cloth over his forehead, and he struggled to open his eyes. Daphne sat at a chair at his bedside, her scarred features eerie in the dim light from the lantern she had brought with her and placed on the ground. She waited until he was slightly more lucid before asking, "What happened, Harry? How did this happen to you?"

"Dream," Harry rasped. "Voldemort."

Daphne froze. "You entered his mind, didn't you?"

Harry nodded, wincing at the pain. His entire body felt raw and sore. "I didn't mean to...it just happened."

"You are growing stronger," Daphne said, but in an ominous tone. "Your magic reached out to examine a possible opponent. But there is a link between you, Harry, through your scar, and you were sucked in. How did you escape?"

"Barely," he said. "Water..."

Daphne picked up a glass from her feet and carefully poured some into Harry's mouth. Harry felt his fever slowly fading, and his pounding headache becoming less painful. He tried to sit up, but Daphne held him down. "No, rest. You can tell me what you need to without exerting yourself. You aren't going anywhere anyway. What did you hear?"

"House...manor, probably," Harry said. "Two people with Him. Peter..."

Daphne bit back a curse. "Go on," she told him.

"Another man, tall, thin, blonde hair I think. Talking to Him. Tell Him....telling him that his preparations were complete, that he'd be moving tomorrow. Telling him that *she* was ready. Mentioned guards, 'she'll be out,' he said."

Daphne frowned. "*She*?"

Harry shook his head, which merely increased the pounding. "Two women, I think," he told his guardian, his voice weak. "He knew I was there," he added lastly.

Daphne nodded grimly. "I should have expected that this would happen. I'll have to talk to Dumbledore. There doesn't seem to be anything we can do about whatever is happening tomorrow, because we don't know enough. But I'll instruct him to start re-gathering the Order. Voldemort is on the move." She paused. "Did you see him?"

Harry shook his head weakly. "No," he said. "I saw the back of the chair."

"He's weak," Daphne told him. "Possibly so weak that he hasn't regained the use of his body. He might have recovered faster if the Stone hadn't reflected the curse at him yet again. We were fortunate, then, it seems." She rose. "I'm going to contact Dumbledore. When I'm finished I'll stay the rest of the night with you. If it's alright with you, I'll poke around your mind a bit, just to shore up your defenses and figure out if there is any damage to worry about."

Harry nodded, rolling over. His fever was fading fast now. He was cold, and wrapped the sweat-soaked sheets closer to him. Daphne looked him in the eyes one more time, and then departed.

Rolling over, Harry stared out the window. He wasn't sure how he was going to go back to sleep. He knew that Daphne was right, that there was nothing that he or she could do to stop Voldemort right now, because they simply didn't know enough. Voldemort had set many traps in the past, hoping that his enemies would try to stop him using incomplete information, and making them pay for it. It would do no good to rush off after him now. He might even be on the continent. But somehow, Harry knew that wasn't true.

Lord Voldemort had returned to the British Isles.

Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ was always chaotic on the day of the Hogwarts Express's departure, but today seemed particularly bad. Whether it was because the entering class of 1st Years seemed much larger than it usually was, or because more parents had come to see their children off, perhaps in reaction to the events that had transpired at the World Cup, the place was packed, full of mingling human beings. There was an equal clutter of luggage, and it was difficult to move without bumping into someone, let alone find someone in the mess of witches and wizards, young and old. He saw a number of people he recognized, but he saw no sign of Ginny or Hermione. Daphne had left earlier and he'd already maneuvered his trunk, considerably heavier because of the Miner collection, into the luggage car of the train. He was wearing his Hogwarts robes; he preferred loose

Wizarding robes to simple t-shirts and jeans. Or maybe it was that Daphne wouldn't be caught dead wearing something other than her robes. Or a combination of both.

Finally, he did spot someone, though it wasn't exactly who he was looking for. Blaise was leaning lazily against one of the brick pillars, surveying the mess of humanity before him. He smiled when his eyes met Harry's. Harry made his way through the throng of people to meet him. "Fancy seeing you here," Blaise said in greeting. "How have you been?"

"Pretty good," Harry said. He and Daphne had decided to tell no one about his dreams. "Had a bit of a run-in with the Malfoys about a week ago."

Blaise raised an eyebrow. "You'll be telling me that story, you hear? Where are your other friends?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. I scanned the train, but I can only see the compartments on the platform side. They might be on the opposite side. Care to find out?" he asked.

Blaise shrugged. "Sure."

They made their way through the mass of students and parents and got onto the train. A quick search turned up nothing. "I wonder where they are," Blaise said. "It's not like Granger to be late for anything."

"We've still got ten minutes before the train leaves," Harry pointed out. "She might be staying with the Weasleys, and they tend to have...problems when they try to get everything together."

Blaise snorted. "I can imagine. Why don't we find a compartment and invite them in when they arrive. I see you are already dressed," he remarked, noticing that Harry was already in his black robes. Yes, they had gotten some strange looks walking through King's Cross, but so what?

"I prefer robes," Harry said simply.

Blaise nodded. "Fair enough." They came upon an empty compartment and sat down, waiting for Harry's friends. Blaise's dark eyes stared into his own, curious and questioning. When Harry looked away, he finally broke his silence. "Okay, fine. I'll ask. What have you been doing this summer?"

Harry smirked at him. "Now, why would I tell you that?"

Blaise hid his frustration well, but Harry could tell he wasn't happy. "I'm not asking you to treat me as your secret confidant. But it would be nice if I had a better idea of what a classmate that I consider to be my friend did during the summer outside of 'trained with my guardian.' I'm frankly surprised she didn't start training you before, though you are driven and ambitious enough to make up for it on your own."

"She wanted me to have a childhood," Harry told him.

Blaise snorted. "That didn't exactly happen."

"No, it didn't," Harry said, his voice emotionless. "But I still have no reason to trust you."

"Does the fact that I got Hermione back to the Hospital Wing before she became dinner for one of the creatures in the Forbidden Forest not count or something? And for your information, my parents don't know that we are 'friends.' My mother considers that venture a failure. If it helps, I'll tell you what I was doing this summer," Blaise said, his voice also calm. It had been a battle between two Slytherins, with one desiring something of the other, one seeking to keep any sensitive information away from the other. And Blaise had just bowed out by making a concession.

"Go on," Harry said.

Blaise sighed. "The summer was pretty boring, really. My father gave me some more sword-training, but it's sort of lost its novelty. It's almost more of a chore; I can do more damage with a word, and not risk hurting myself in the process."

"Why does your father insist that you learn it?" Harry asked.

"It's a family thing. The good news is that he's given up with the long-swords. I could barely hold those things, let alone swing them. They're just not practical. I realize that really good wizards can transfigure their wands into swords, but unless you just can't win dueling with wands, I don't understand the point," the pureblood boy told him. "With my father, he's just carrying on the legacy of his ancestors. The Zabinis were one of the last families to give up bringing a sword to a formal duel, and that was really just as a matter of courtesy. I'll tell you though, I could do some damage with one of those big things if I could cast a Lightening Charm on it. My father, who is about three times my height and weight, naturally wouldn't allow that."

Harry was thoughtful for a moment. "I've got to say, the use of the sword is one of the few things that we gave up before the Muggles did. When would you say the sword faded out of common use? The 18th century?" he asked.

"Yeah, that's probably about right. Of course, we kept using them into this century. But you aren't suggesting the Muggles are more advanced than *us*, are you?" Blaise asked, looking baffled.

Harry smiled. "Actually, that's exactly what I'm saying. The difference is that we have magic, which allows us to do many things that Muggles needed to develop advanced technology to perform. But my point was that Muggles didn't abandon them as practical combat weapons until the 19th century, even with the development of firearms."

"You know a lot of Muggle history, don't you?" Blaise asked.

Harry nodded. "I've been interested in history of all kinds since I was a young boy. Because I grew up in a community very close to Muggles, I had access to those kinds of resources. One thing that I've found is the histories of Muggles and Wizards really aren't that different. The Muggles have more and deadlier wars, but considering that most of the leaders in history have been Muggles, and those that have been wizards have ruled Muggles, it's not surprising. We have magic; they don't. That's the essential difference. The average wizard knows no more about how air conditioning works than the average

Muggle knows about Transfiguration. We live in separate worlds. The only way that they are 'common' is in population. Magic is a genetic mutation; in many ways, a Muggle biologist would call it a defect. For some reason, certain humans were born with the ability to summon and control magic. They passed that ability on. And they did so through countless Muggles."

Blaise whistled. "You do realize that everything you just said mocks everything that purebloods stand for."

Harry's eyes hardened. "That's the *point*. I'm not saying I'm ready to welcome Muggles into wizarding society and reveal magic to them, or that I'd rather be a Muggle, but pretending that we are somehow 'civilized' and they are 'primitive' is using the same logic that has resulted in billions of deaths throughout both of our histories. European Muggles subjugated and exterminated the natives of the Americas for the same reasons. Ironical, because many of them followed religions that had begun as worshipping magic as an essence, or a spirit. Many of them were wizards, but they had no wands, and they fell just as easily to European firearms," Harry said, his voice growing colder.

This entire conversation was, in many ways, an experiment. It was the culmination of a lifetime of on-and-off study of Muggle and Wizarding history. And the conclusions that he had come to were disturbing indeed. If anything, Muggle society was *more* civilized than the Wizarding World. They too had their blood feuds, and their belief in the families of 'nobles' being purer than those of common peasants. The difference was, of course, that Muggles had *abandoned* that system. The wizarding world clung to it like a lifeline.

Blaise was about to respond when the compartment door slid open. "There you are...hello Blaise," Ginny said from the corridor. She and Hermione entered and sat down, with Hermione sitting on Harry's side and Ginny on Blaise's. The bushy-haired witch didn't meet the other boy's eyes. What Harry didn't know was if it was embarrassment from the way he had rescued her in the Forest, or if it was because she simply didn't like the boy but didn't want to show it in Harry's presence.

As if to confirm it, Blaise asked, to Harry's chagrin, "Not so thrilled to find me here, are you, Granger?"

Hermione gave him a look that would have melted stone. "Just because you saved my life does not mean that I have to like you," she said, her voice deadly soft. "I'm willing to cut you some slack, but you aren't helping your case."

Blaise shrugged. "I wasn't hoping for a reward or anything. But I wasn't going to leave you there."

"Then let me ask this," Hermione began. "If it had been someone else, someone who wasn't Harry Potter's best friend, would you have done the same thing? Would you have left them there and gone for help? Or would you have done nothing and insured that you didn't get in trouble, saying nothing except to escape punishment by breaking curfew to distract Professor Snape or McGonagall."

"Of course not," Blaise replied instantly. "I may be a Pureblood, and a Slytherin, but that doesn't make me heartless. Maybe if you'd been an injured Acromantula or something... but not a human being, muggle-born or not," he said firmly.

Hermione didn't break her gaze. "I don't believe you," she said softly. "I think that you decided to risk your own arse because you wanted to gain Harry's gratitude. And *that* is what I object to."

Harry could feel a headache coming on. This was like him and Ron. Worse, because one was as close as a sister and the other was actively trying to become his friend.

"When you are done cussing out Blaise for no reason, Hermione, would you mind offering some speculation as to what the bloody hell this big event is that is taking place at Hogwarts? I know you re-read *Hogwarts, A History* trying to find a reference," Ginny said.

Hermione shook her head. "I have no idea. I didn't find any kind of special event that's been held less than three centuries ago. There was this Tri-Wizard Tournament, but it was banned because it was too dangerous for schoolchildren to participate in. Students weren't making it out alive, and parents, understandably, weren't happy. Of

course, it took the death of some Pureblood heir of some baron for it to finally stop. The whole thing seems barbaric, really.”

“I’ve heard of that tournament too,” Blaise added. “But nothing to indicate that they’ve resurrected it. Or that there have even been efforts to do that. At least, my parents haven’t discussed it in my earshot.”

“Malfoy knows something,” Harry remarked. “His nose is even higher in the air than it usually is.”

“Speaking of which,” Blaise interrupted. “Did you really face down Lucius Malfoy alone and live to tell about it. Something about a collection of rare books.” Harry cursed mentally. He’d managed to avoid telling Daphne about that incident because she might do something violent. He’d also hoped to prevent Ginny and Hermione from learning of it, because they might kill *him*.

“*What?*” Hermione and Ginny said at the exact same time.

Harry sighed. “It’s nothing that any of you have to be concerned about. There was a collection of rare books about Goblins. I wanted them and had enough money to buy them. Draco, his buddies, and his father showed up and wanted to take them from me. I told them to go to hell and reminded Lucius that Daphne had sworn to exact revenge if he ever tried to hurt me. They let me go. That’s *it*,” he insisted. Ginny looked incredulous.

“You nearly started a fight with an ex-Death Eater over *books*? Even *Hermione* wouldn’t do that!” she cried.

Hermione scowled at her, then turned to Harry. “Her point is well taken. What could possibly be so valuable about a bunch of antique books?”

“That they were probably the only copies of William Miner’s work not collecting dust in some Pureblood library, where no one who actually cares about Goblins can read about them,” Harry explained. “The man’s brilliant, actually. You should read some of it,” he told Hermione.

The bushy-haired bookworm still wasn't happy about the whole thing, but she didn't say anything else, either. "You need to be more careful. People want to hurt you, Harry, and you shouldn't just stick your neck out for them if they are holding an axe in their hands."

"I *know* that," he growled. "You need to accept the fact that I'm not completely safe, I've never been completely safe, and I never *will be* completely safe. And you need to live with that."

Hermione seemed taken aback.

"Maybe I should leave," Blaise offered.

"No. Stay," Harry said, a bit more forceful than he had intended. "This isn't about you; it's about a recurring conflict between me and my friends. You leaving won't accomplish anything except to deprive me of possible support."

"And why does what *he* thinks mean anything?" Ginny demanded. "That had to be the most fatalistic thing I've ever heard anyone say, and now you expect to be able to defend it using the opinion of a 'friend' that doesn't know half as much as I, let alone *Hermione*, do? That sounds like a good plan?"

Harry took a deep breath. "It isn't fatalistic...well, maybe it is. But it's the truth, no matter what I try to do to avoid staring it in the face. And you both know it. It isn't right, but that doesn't mean that it isn't realistic."

"*Realistic* my arse," Hermione cursed again, a rarity in and of itself. "You are trying to pass off going out and looking for trouble as *destiny*. I don't care how rare or important a bunch of books are, they are not worth risking your *life*. *You* are the one that needs to learn *that*."

"You don't understand-"

"I never *do*, do I?" Hermione said in a mocking fashion. The whistle blew, the train lurched, and began to move forward. Ginny stared out the window at the crowd, probably searching for her mother. She turned back to him.

"She's right, you know," Ginny said softly. "That's always your excuse."

Harry closed his eyes. "I won't let you do this again," he growled.

Blaise got up. "I'm definitely out of here."

"No. *Stay*," Harry told him again. "You aren't the problem. Tune it out if it bothers you. I still want to talk to you. But I need to get through this first."

"It's not that easy," Ginny cut in.

Harry glared at her, but she stood firm.

Hermione still had her arms crossed, her brown eyes staring at him, harsh and accusing. "I won't let you get yourself killed. You are too important, to *all* of us, to allow that to happen. You won't do anyone any good if Lucius Malfoy kills you and dumps your body in a gutter."

"I think your problem is that you aren't giving Harry enough credit," Blaise interrupted. "He's both smarter and more powerful than you are making it seem like. Could he take on Lucius Malfoy and win? Very possibly. And Harry isn't a Gryffindor, and I don't mean that as an insult to you. Just keep in mind that if he was, you'd have twice the trouble keeping him out of danger. You just need to put it out of mind, Granger. It might be alien to you, but it's the truth. Harry can't go jump in a hole and hide. He needs to be out there, proving himself in full view of the Wizarding world."

"Says *who*?" Hermione demanded. "Proph-ow!" Hermione was cut off as Harry angrily kicked her leg. He gave a meaningful look at Blaise, and Hermione turned bright red with shame and embarrassment.

"I'm sorry," she said, stopped for the moment.

Blaise was staring at them in bafflement. "You heard *nothing*. I'm dead serious. Don't think I'll ever talk to you again if you tell one soul," Harry warned.

Blaise nodded stiffly. "Fine," he said. It was not anger or hurt. It was a simple affirmative from a boy who had secrets of his own to keep.

Harry turned back to Hermione. "Do you have anything else that you would like to say? I don't mean to attack you, but you started this discussion."

"I started it because someone had to," Hermione said softly. "Because you won't listen to reason, I decided to shove it in your face. And that doesn't seem to be working either. I'm *worried* about you, Harry. I'm worried that you have no idea what you are getting into. Daphne..."

"Daphne isn't always *right*," Ginny added, with surprising emotion. "She's... *disturbed*, Harry, and you know that." She cast an irritated look at Blaise. "And I'm not sure *he* has any more of a clue about this whole thing than you do."

Harry turned an accusing gaze on her. "You *are* taking her side, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am, because I happen to agree with her," Ginny told him, her gaze level and unblinking. "You are too reckless and unconcerned with your own personal safety."

"Zabini, get out," Hermione ordered suddenly. "There's no place for you in this conversation, and you might hear something you shouldn't. I'm sure that if Harry is capable of standing up to Lucius Malfoy, he won't have any problems with a couple of young teenage witches."

Blaise raised his hands in surrender and left. Harry's eyes bored into Hermione's. "*What. Do. You. Want?*" he asked, pausing between each word. "What do you want from me? I can't change my own destiny. This is what I was *born* for, Hermione. This is why I *survived*. I have a lot left to learn, I know that. But I can't learn by keeping my head down. I have to take risks. Someday, I'll need the Goblins by my side. Unlike with most wizards, they hold a respect for me. Miner's books are the best in existence. I wanted them, and I got them."

"This isn't even about *that*," Hermione said angrily. "This is about a pattern of behavior dating back several years. I should have seen it

earlier. We never should have gone down that trapdoor. That's what started this entire thing. He wouldn't have been able to get the Stone anyway. He would have stayed down there until Dumbledore came, or he would have fled before that happened. And in second year-

Harry scoffed. "Are you really going to blame Riddle on *me*?"

"Yes, I am," Hermione said firmly. "I've done a lot of thinking about what has happened to you over the last few years. And I've come to the conclusion that your *ambition* has been, in some form, the cause of most of your problems. You would have had nothing to gain from Riddle if you hadn't been seeking secrets of success. It's not like you needed companionship, not with me and Ginny around, practically at your every beck and call. And I *don't* resent that, by the way, because I know that the relationship works both ways. But you were hardly lacking people to talk to."

"You are a girl," Harry gritted out.

Hermione didn't blink. "What of it?"

"You've got to understand...I care about both of you a great deal, but I've never had any male friends, with the possible exception of Blaise, since I left Newfoundland behind. And there were certain things that I felt Riddle could tell me that you couldn't. I made a mistake. But I won't acknowledge that as evidence that everything I've been trying to accomplish is wrong," he told her. "What else? Sirius? That was a desire for *revenge*, Hermione. When you grow up around Daphne, and see how difficult her life has been, it tends to come to that. I felt her pain as well as my own. But I tried to stay away from him, because that's what Daphne told me to do."

"That's the *only* reason? You do realize that what you are saying is roughly equivalent to saying that Daphne cares more about your life than *you* do, right? Doesn't that strike you as *wrong*?" Hermione asked. "Sometimes I wonder *why* the Hat put you in Slytherin. You can be as impulsive and thoughtless as *Ron*, sometimes. Aren't I right?" she asked Ginny.

Ginny started. "Sorry, what?" she asked hurriedly.

"Aren't I right?" Hermione repeated. "About the fact that he can be as impulsive as your brother at times?"

Ginny thought about it for a moment. "No, I don't think you are right. Harry actually thinks things through before he does them. Just because his reasoning is flawed doesn't make him thoughtless."

"I'm not sure whether to take that as an indication that you are on my side or not," Harry remarked. "Are we really accomplishing *anything* with this whole thing?" he asked Hermione. "All you've managed to do is drive Blaise away, and-"

"*Good*," Hermione snapped. "I don't *trust* him. He's sneaky, conniving, manipulative...why are you *laughing* at me?" she demanded, her cheeks reddening.

"Because you couldn't be more wrong," Harry explained. "He's more naïve than *you* are. Just because he was raised differently doesn't make him...a Nott, for example. Nott would fit that description perfectly. But Blaise is just a kid, even more so than the two of us because he hasn't been through the same hell that we've endured."

Hermione took a deep breath to calm herself. "I guess I'll take your word for it. I just don't *like* him. He frustrates me with his mere *presence*."

"*That*," Ginny added, "is obvious. And he knows that too." She fixed her gaze on Harry. "Putting him aside for now, we've still got to settle this."

"I'm not sure how that's possible," Harry told her. "I won't go looking for trouble, but I'm not going to run away either. Other wizard's perceptions of me *matter* Hermione. I'm not part of the Pureblood circle in any way. I have no connections to their families or to anyone else. I have to impress them, and any other wizards, so that they will listen to me. The war is coming soon, Hermione, and you know it. I'm not walking around expecting the sky to fall the next minute, but I won't allow myself to be complacent."

"That's all well and good," she conceded. "But you've said that for over a year now. You act restrained and rational in these arguments,

but you don't behave that way when the situations actually arise. You tend to be impulsive, confrontational, and, dare I say it, a bit arrogant."

A part of Harry knew that she was speaking the truth. "Maybe..." he trailed off, and sighed. "Maybe, to an extent, you are right. And maybe I should do a better job of basing what I do on what I say. But if you want a guarantee that I'll be safe, I *can't* give that to you. I don't have the luxury of knowing that I'm always protected from harm."

Hermione fell silent.

"It's not *fair*," Ginny said, breaking the silence. "I know that doesn't make a difference, but you have to understand that we feel sorry for you...at least, when you aren't asking for what you get."

Harry shrugged. "My life has never *been* fair. I had my parents taken from me before I got a chance to know them. I've never had the gift of anonymity. I've never had the ability to just disappear into the crowd. Every one knows my name; every one knows my scar. I can't do anything about that. I can't change the past, so I choose not to linger on it. What's done is done. What matters is the future."

Hermione nodded weakly. "I guess you are right," she admitted, sounding reluctant.

The conversation that dominated the remainder of the trip to Hogwarts was considerably less antagonistic, but the mood remained subdued. Hermione might have conceded the battle, but she had not given up on the war. And Harry knew it.

A/N: Well, this one was about half the length of the last one, but I wanted to end it at a reasonable place.

No, Harry isn't completely free of the dreams. And like I've said before, his magic tends to have a mind of its own.

The conflict which dominates this chapter, and indeed, is a central conflict in the story, is the battle between Harry and his friends, with all of them pulling him in different directions, and his own ambition

and ego clashing with most of them. It's not that I mean to make Hermione petulant or wanting to hold Harry back, nor am I in any way implying that Harry is right and his friends are wrong. Snape, as you'll see, has an entirely different idea about Harry's plans and actions.

Voldemort's plan has been altered a bit, as evident from the dream.

The next chapter will be split between the perspectives of Harry and Hermione.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter 5: What Lies Ahead

The students disembarked the Hogwarts Express at Hogsmeade station in the middle of a downpour. Black-robed children hurried about with First Years huddling together near Hagrid's shining lantern. Harry, Hermione and Ginny hurried across the station platform into the muddy field where the Threstral-drawn carriages waited, but as they were about to get into the carriage, Ginny stopped suddenly with a gasp. "Ginny?" Harry asked. He noticed that she was staring into the fiery red eyes of the lead Threstral. *But she can't see them, can she?*

"I can see them," she said, her voice wavering. Her knees were shaking, and Harry rushed over to support her, as Hermione watched with concern.

"How?" Hermione asked. "You haven't seen anyone...*die*, have you?" Her voice was filled with a kind of "Aha!" tone that came from sudden realization. Obviously, she'd made some kind of connection that Harry hadn't picked up on yet.

Ginny shook her head. "I...hadn't thought so," she said, her tone entirely unconvincing. Harry knew she was lying. One did not simply forget witnessing the death of another human being. He wondered if this might have to do with the nightmares that she'd suffered the previous year into this summer. Perhaps that was the connection that Hermione thought that she had discovered. She was still staring at it when she said, "Let's get into the carriage. I'm getting wet."

All three of them climbed into the carriage and settled in. They didn't speak as the Threstral-drawn vehicles rolled up the wet, muddy path towards the brightly lit castle in the distance. Harry sat closer to Ginny than he normally did, and she tiredly leaned her head on his shoulder. "You okay?" he whispered.

Ginny nodded. "Just a bit tired...you don't mind, do you?"

Harry shook his head. She smiled, and relaxed again. Harry glanced over at Hermione, who was staring out of the open door of the carriage into the heavy rain. Harry decided not to interrupt her thoughts, and closed his own eyes as they continued up the path.

The carriage ground to a halt, and the three of them got out and walked through the huge oak doors into the magnificent entrance hall of Hogwarts. Harry always felt more at home here, for some reason. The mass of students began to file in to the Great Hall, and it was here that Hermione separated from her friends. It was customary that students sit with their Houses at the Welcoming and Leaving Feasts, and Hermione didn't mind spending some time with her fellow classmates. Blaise was already sitting at the Slytherin table, and waved to Harry and Ginny as they approached. Harry sat down next to him. "Sorry about that whole thing on the train. I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable."

Blaise shrugged it off. "Don't worry about it. Sounds like she was really upset about the whole thing, though. Not sure why she brought me into it."

"She's just not that fond of you," Ginny explained. "You strike her as sneaky and arrogant, and she doesn't want you to be Harry's friend."

Blaise nodded, and then stared out at the mass of students and the Head Table. "That's odd."

"What?" asked Ginny.

"No Defense teacher," he clarified. "There isn't any one new at the Head Table." He paused, looking thoughtful. "I'd hoped Lupin would come back, but my father told me he resigned. Pity, that. I wonder if Snape finally got the job. He's been dying to teach that subject for years."

"Small wonder, after seeing traitors like Quirrell and idiots like Lockhart at that desk," Harry commented. "I wasn't aware he knew much about *defense* against Dark Magic."

Ginny frowned. "What?" Harry asked.

She leaned over. "I heard Dad mentioned a guy named 'Mad-Eye' in connection to Hogwarts," she said. "I haven't the slightest clue who he is, of course."

"I do," Harry told her. "Alastor Moody, an Auror from the War. Daphne says that he taught her everything she knows."

"Impressive," Blaise said. "Any body who knows more than Daphne Dressler has to be *really* good. And a bloody good teacher. I've heard of the guy too, but he didn't sound like the type who'd agree to come out of retirement to teach children."

As they were speaking, the Sorting began. Dozens of young, black-robed witches and wizards filed into the Great Hall followed by Professor Minerva McGonagall, wearing fine robes of deep maroon, the color of her own house, and a pointed witch's hat. The noise level dropped quite a bit, but Harry wasn't particularly interested in the new First Years. But when they had all joined a table, one remained, and unless Harry was quite mistaken, she was *not* eleven-years old.

"I'd like to apologize for my oversight," Professor McGonagall said. "Though it is not common, Hogwarts occasionally receives new students who either transfer from other wizarding schools or have been home-schooled until they enroll. This is Giselle Reisor, and she will be a Fourth Year." She gestured for the girl to get up and walk over to the stool where the Sorting Hat was resting. She appeared timid at first, but seemed to gain confidence as she strode towards the front of the hall. She sat down and pulled the Sorting Hat over her eyes. It didn't take long before the hat bellowed, "*SLYTHERIN!*"

Harry clapped politely as the girl removed the hat and rose, gentling setting the Sorting Hat back on the stool and make her way over to where the Fourth Year Slytherins sat. Harry studied her as she approached. She was fairly tall, a few inches shorter than he, with short black hair and icy blue eyes that scanned the table as if searching for potential threats. Giselle was waved over by Millicent Bulstrode, sitting about six seats away from Harry, and accepted the invitation. The way in which she moved did not scream 'pureblood,' though the possibility remained. Harry was curious, and resolved to learn more.

Blaise spoke first, "What do you think?"

"Dumbledore's about to speak," Ginny interrupted. "Quiet."

As his friend whispered this, the tall, grandfatherly-looking wizard, dressed in colorful robes of purple and gold, his long white beard tucked into them, stood and held out his hands to both sides. "Welcome," he said to the room. Whatever chatter that had persisted when the great wizard had gotten up faded in a heartbeat. Albus Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, was a man that commanded immense respect from everyone. Harry didn't know if the rumor that he was the only person that Lord Voldemort had ever feared was completely accurate, but he knew that the old man possessed incredible power, raw magical strength and ability that rivaled or even succeeded Harry's own. The difference between him and the teenager over a century his junior was of course, that he had wielded it longer, and could control it to an extent that Harry could only dream of.

"Welcome," he repeated, "to another year at Hogwarts. I trust that you are all rested and rusty from your time off. I expect that it may take a few days to shake off all of the cobwebs, but I expect another fine year of learning and growth from all of you."

When he paused, there was now dead silence. Dumbledore commanded everyone's attention. *Someday, they'll look at me like that too*, Harry told himself. He let that thought slip away and refocused his attention.

"I would also like to inform you that a very special event will be taking place at Hogwarts this year. This event is the culmination of months of work between the ministries of several different countries and the administrations of several wizarding schools, and represents a recent high in international magical cooperation. For the first time since it was discontinued for safety reasons, Hogwarts will be hosting the Triwizard Tournament."

This time, even the respect that the students had for Dumbledore couldn't contain the excitement as whispered conversations broke out everywhere. "Bloody hell," Blaise whispered. "That's brilliant..."

Ginny opened her mouth to say something, but Dumbledore began speaking again, quieting the room. "The two other schools that will be competing are Durmstrang School of Sorcery and the Beauxbatons

Academy of Magic. Their delegations, including prospective champions and the Heads of each school, will be arriving sometime in October. On Halloween, the champions will be selected and the judges revealed.” He paused, possibly for dramatic effect. “It is a great honor to host such a historic competition. While the ultimate goal of this enterprise is to bring home a trophy, this is also a wonderful opportunity to meet young witches and wizards from other schools, cultures, and backgrounds. I expect that we will learn as much from interacting with one another as we will from watching the champions compete. As for the champions, the winner will receive 1,000 galleons prize money, as well as the Triwizard Cup itself.” Whispers of excitement broke out among the crowd, but were silenced when Dumbledore continued.

“The Triwizard Tournament was originally banned because of the high death toll. We have taken steps to insure that this new incarnation will not be nearly as dangerous. However, we have agreed to limit prospective champions to those who have already come of age. We are all in agreement that students below 7th year will not have the training and skills to cope with the challenges they will face.” There was a loud series of groans and cries of protest, more noticeably from the Weasley twins. Harry couldn’t help but grin; the twins would be turning seventeen less than a year after the champions were selected. And assuming that both would be allowed to represent Hogwarts, Harry wasn’t so sure they weren’t up to the challenge. Many were fooled by their actions, believing them to be pranksters of negligible magical talent. Harry knew better. Identical magical twins were exceedingly rare, and nearly all of them had been very powerful. It was a mistake to underestimate the Weasley twins.

Harry abruptly realized that Ginny was whispering something angrily in his ear. He turned and looked at her. “What?” he asked.

She took a deep breath. Her face was red with fury. “*You. Are. Not. Entering.* Do you understand me?” she demanded, her voice hissing through gritted teeth.

Harry stared at her in confusion. “I wouldn’t be able to pull it off even if I wanted to. I was actually thinking about the twins’ chances, not

daydreaming about hoisting the Cup over my head...anyway, you wouldn't have a *chance* to kill me. Daphne would get to me first."

"Good," Ginny said. "Because it sounds like *exactly* the kind of boneheaded, reckless, delusional thing that you would try."

Harry held back a retort. It had certainly occurred to him that the winner of the Triwizard Tournament would receive the kind of positive fame he so craved, but the risks far outweighed the benefits. He would make his name in other ways.

Dumbledore finally quieted the student body. "Once the delegations from the other schools arrive, I will explain the competition in greater detail. For now, though, I have a few more announcements. As usual, the Forbidden Forest is out-of-bounds, and any students caught within it will be punished severely." He gave his customary warning glance at the Weasley twins, who appeared to be still seething over their inability to enter the Triwizard Tournament. "In addition, Mr. Filch has asked me to remind you that-

Dumbledore only got that far, because the doors to the Great Hall were flung open with tremendous - and Harry thought, unnecessary - force, crashing into the stone walls of the castle with a loud boom. A limping figure began hobbling down the center aisle towards the Head Tables. The man, his grizzled face scarred and battered, his right eye an unnatural electric blue that swiveling in equally impossible directions as he approached, had one of the most menacing and intimidating appearances that Harry had ever seen. His wooden leg, at the end of it a shining metal claw, clinked softly on the stone floor. He wore a black cape, one that almost hid his misshapen nose and scarred visage. It was Alastor Moody.

Dumbledore smiled at the appearance of the newcomer. "I would like to introduce my good friend Alastor Moody, who has graciously accepted the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher for the coming term. Professor Moody brings with him unparalleled skills and experience, and I hope that you are able to take advantage of that knowledge." The room remained silent, save for the occasional whisper, as Daphne Dressler's mentor took his seat. Dumbledore then proceeded to complete his announcement concerning all of the

new additions to Filch's list of items banned at Hogwarts, and made a few more comments before declaring, "Dig in."

The food appeared, and Harry, consumed by a ravenous hunger, quickly loaded up his plate. He glanced over toward the Gryffindor table and saw that, to his relief, Hermione was actually *eating* her house-elf-prepared food, albeit reluctantly. Harry and Ginny chatted throughout dinner, but Harry was more concerned with nourishment than conversation. He listened, though, to bits of discussion between some of his classmates, including Nott, Daphne Greengrass, Millicent Bulstrode, Blaise, and Pansy Parkinson. He also spared a few glances down at the newcomer, Giselle, who ate quietly and said little. Something was...*off* about her, but he seemed to be the only one that noticed.

"*Potter*," Snape's voice called out as he walked down the dungeon corridor on his way to breakfast the next morning. He stopped and turned. His Potions professor and Head of House stood there, looking no more irritated than he normally did. He obviously wanted to talk to Harry, not to discipline him.

"Yes, Professor?" Harry said politely.

Snape eyed him warily for a moment, for reasons beyond Harry's comprehension. "I wish to speak with you on...a number of subjects. If the conversation runs longer than I intended, I will have breakfast brought to my office." The last statement demonstrated that, so much as it was possible, Severus Snape liked James Potter's son. The fact that he even addressed the unspoken question concerning the desires of another human being was quite meaningful, and demonstrated how far their relationship had come from Harry's First Year. Of course, the fact that he was unusually skilled at Potions and played Quidditch well for Slytherin House probably had something to do with it. Snape judged no one by his own character, he only cared about a person's actions, and more specifically, how they affected himself. Harry had learned to understand, and to a degree, accept that.

"Of course, sir," Harry replied. "We'll speak in your office?"

Snape nodded slowly. "Come," he said simply.

Harry followed obediently. One of Snape's only redeeming values was that he was extremely predictable. They arrived at the door to his office, which Snape walked inside. Harry quickly entered just as Snape was sitting down. Neither one of them spoke for a moment. The Potions Master's desk was clean, for once not covered in heavily marked student essays. "I hear from my Godson that he and his father were involved in a bit of an altercation with you, Potter."

The way Snape spoke of Draco Malfoy was quite telling as to what he thought of the boy; he was contemptuous and angry. It was difficult to blame him for being disappointed. Considering who his father was, no matter how arrogant and conceited Lucius could be, the fact that the younger Malfoy seemed to have picked up none of the proper behavior and manner expected of a pureblood heir was somewhat mystifying. Draco had an extremely inflated opinion of himself, and was obviously spoiled. But when compared to a girl like Daphne Greengrass, who Harry considered to be the consummate Slytherin, he seemed rather...*pathetic*. Malfoy spoke loudly and boisterously, and crumpled when asked to back up his claims of greatness. The same could be said, albeit to a lesser extent, of Pansy Parkinson.

"Two of them, actually, sir," Harry admitted, answering his question.

Snape frowned. "Two?"

Harry took a deep breath. "The first came at the Quidditch World Cup. Unless I was very much mistaken, Lucius was parading around the moor with some of his old comrades the night of the match. Daphne, Andromeda and Nymphadora Tonks, and I, ambushed them. I managed to drive them off."

Snape eyed him warily. "Potter, you are not normally one to take credit for things you haven't done. But I have trouble believing that last statement. What, exactly, are you claiming to have done?"

Harry thought a moment, then responded. "I sent a burst of power right into the middle of the formation...with rather explosive results."

Snape closed his eyes. After a long pause, he said, "I do hope you realize how profoundly *stupid* using your power in such a manner is. It is dangerous and wasteful. You could be a great duelist Potter, but you will not be one if you continued to insist on brute force. That, Mr. Potter, was the downfall of one Lord Grindelwald. He believed in his own invulnerability, and displayed no understanding of the finer points of the Dark Arts. He was a blunt instrument, a dangerous and unstable man who was ultimately destroyed because of his arrogance."

Harry frowned. "I hadn't expected that comparison."

"It is, Potter, more valid than a comparison between you and the Dark Lord," Snape told him, his voice steely and cold. He paused, smiling in a way that sent chills down Harry's neck. "When I spoke of my Godson, I did it to test a theory," he explained. "And it was no challenge to pick up your thoughts; your barriers are pitiful. You are *overconfident*, Potter. You have far more to learn than you realize."

Harry listened intently. He wouldn't allow shame to show, but he knew that Snape's statements were logical and perfectly rational. He also knew that Snape was telling him the exact same thing his friends had been trying to convince him of for over a year, but the way he approached it was different. Somehow, it was making an impact. He'd have to spend some time thinking about this. "Why are you so concerned?" Harry asked, practically blurting the question. "You almost sound like you feel that you could teach me these things."

Snape eyed him coldly. "If that is the impression that you are getting, then you are mistaken. I care, Potter, because I am bound to the Dark Lord. And anyone with half of a functioning brain realizes that you do not possess such power by *accident*. Fate has purpose, Potter. I do not need a Prophecy to allow me to understand that you will be the ultimate decider of the fate of the wizarding world. Dumbledore is *old*, Potter, and his time has passed. But be warned, Potter, I will not raise you up on a pedestal until you *earn* that right. You have earned my respect, if not my admiration. But the fact that you are willing to take up the banner of the Light, or simply to oppose Voldemort at all, means *nothing* to me. I am not one that gives my loyalty blindly."

"I know that," Harry said. "And I know that I still have a lot to learn. Daphne-"

"- is *blind*," Snape interrupted sharply. "Dressler is broken woman clinging to a desperate hope. Whether you want to accept it or not, it is the truth. Her knowledge is still of great value to you. But her *wisdom* and *advice* are not."

He paused, but Harry sensed that it wouldn't be appropriate for him to speak. "You will arrange a meeting with the Headmaster," he said. "Albus can teach you far more than I can, even if he too is occasionally unable to sense what is directly in front of him. In addition, you will meet with me every Thursday for Occlumency lessons. This is not negotiable. Do I make myself clear, Potter?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied firmly. "Thank you."

"You shouldn't be thanking me, Potter," Snape said. "After all, I haven't told you anything you didn't already know. And if you are unable to think realistically without my prodding, then we have already lost. I will not baby you, Potter. I will not be your mentor, your teacher, or your counselor. But I am a man who acts in his own best interests. And preparing you for what lies ahead ranks very close to the top of my list."

Hermione was not fond of Potions. As soon as she crossed the threshold into the dark, dank Potions classroom, most of her good cheer from her first class of the year, Transfiguration, had vanished.

She really couldn't say why it was that she really didn't enjoy Potions. It probably had something to do with the teacher, but she hated the thought that she would not allow herself to enjoy what could be a fascinating subject simply because Professor Snape was a mean, vindictive bastard. Though Harry seemed to have allowed it to fade into the past, Hermione's memories of his appalling treatment of the two of them during their First Year were as clear as ever. And as ashamed as she still was that she'd allowed her own prejudices and preconceptions to color her opinion of Harry, she still hadn't forgiven Snape for intentionally tormenting her by partnering the two. Of

course, they'd been working together ever since, by mutual agreement and to their mutual benefit.

Hermione was well aware that she was Professor McGonagall's favorite pupil, by a wide margin. And Hermione had to admit that she hadn't exactly resisted the opportunity to get close to her Head of House. She justified it by telling herself that she had learned a great deal during their occasional conversations, and that it wasn't as if she *needed* McGonagall's favor to receive excellent marks in Transfiguration.

Snape was an entirely different matter altogether. He was twisted and sadistic, and had no business teaching impressionable young schoolchildren. Even when she achieved highly in his class, the man displayed little but contempt and disdain, for no other reason but that she was a Muggleborn Gryffindor. Ginny didn't like him either, though she didn't really stand out in Potions, and because she was in his House, the Slytherin Head wasn't as harsh with her. Harry...

She simply had no explanation for Harry's relationship with the man. And that concerned her. As much as he might want to forget it, Snape had treated him horribly, only letting up when Harry had become the Slytherin Seeker. Even then, he'd done nothing to protect Harry from the horrific abuse heaped upon him by his own Housemates. Now, Harry looked to him as some kind of mentor. He'd been absent from breakfast, apparently because Snape had wanted to talk to him. She doubted they'd spent the entire time talking about his extra Potions assignments. What further confused her was that he'd been rather subdued. Hermione wasn't about to thank Snape for taking Harry's confidence down a notch, especially given the way in which he'd likely done it, but it seemed possible he might have accomplished something that she and Ginny had utterly failed at.

She quietly took her seat next to Harry, who was studying a Potions text, one that was describing various Healing Potions. Hermione knew little about them except that they were very difficult to make, and obviously required a great deal of precision to insure that they didn't end up causing further harm. Harry glanced up at her. "Good timing," he said. She had stayed behind for a few minutes to discuss

some details of the Transfiguration homework, but it appeared that she wasn't late. Snape's desk was unoccupied.

"Extra work?" she asked.

Harry nodded. "I managed to talk to Moon briefly, and she told me this was the book that she told me Snape had recommended. It's really fascinating, if extremely challenging. Some of these Potions require certain ingredients to be added at precise times of day."

Harry was speaking of Elisha Moon, the quiet and unassuming (at least Hermione believed) Potions prodigy that worked together with Snape in his extra lessons. Harry reported that she had an unbelievable memory of ingredients, their effects and uses, and the ingredients needed to neutralize them. She also had a bit of a darker side. Harry said he'd been a bit disturbed by the long and detailed conversation she had with Snape about lethal poisons, and by the enthusiasm in her voice as she listed the symptoms that a victim would show. Moon was a loner, and the truth was that Hermione simply didn't know her. She worked with Tracy Davis, a Slytherin girl of considerably lesser talent, in the back of the classroom.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the classroom door slamming open. Any students that hadn't already done so instantly sat down and pulled out parchment and quill, awaiting instructions. If there was anything that Snape's tactics of intimidation and disparagement accomplished, it was discipline. Snape marched down the center of the classroom to her desk, black cloak billowing behind him. He sat down and eyed his class with cold eyes, which lingered on Hermione. She stared back at him, unblinking and defiant.

"You've had an entire summer to idle and accomplish nothing, so I expect you to be at your best," he began. "As usual, we will be handling volatile compounds and potentially poisonous mixtures, and I'd prefer that I did not have to carry any dunderheads to the Hospital Wing this year." His eyes found Ron Weasley and Neville Longbottom. Hermione felt a flash of pity. Harry had a unique connection with Neville, and had done his best to build the boy's confidence over the year, but he always melted under the withering glare of Snape.

“Next year, as you should know, you will be taking your Ordinary Wizarding Levels in this class. I expect the majority of you to do poorly, but some might still be salvageable. I am telling you this because we will be studying a number of subjects that will be on that exam this year. The first part of the year will focus primarily on antidotes and the most basic of healing potions, though I fully expect a number of you to fail to brew such simple potions. The second half of the year will be focused on an introduction to simple poisons. Next year, we will cover the more advanced antidotes and poisons, and I am already dreading it,” he finished with a sneer. “Today, you will be attempting to brew the Awakening Potion. As most of you probably suspect, it is used to revive witches and wizards that have either consumed powerful sleeping potions or are suffering from the effects of an average Sleeping Spell.” He drew his wand with a flourish and tapped the board. A long list of ingredients and instructions appeared. Hermione began copying them down as Snape said, “You have everything you need there. I have re-stocked the supply cabinet, so I won’t accept any excuse that you couldn’t find an ingredient. You have the entire class. Begin.”

Hermione got up to gather all of the needed ingredients, while Harry carefully copied Snape’s instructions. Once he was done, he began to examine them closely, searching for possible shortcuts or opportunities to improve the potion. Snape, as exacting and demanding as he could be, still used the standard textbook instructions. Harry knew enough so that he could confidently substitute ingredients or change the measures without fear of ruining the potion itself. And Hermione had gotten the idea that the two of them might be marked down for failure to do exactly that.

She returned with a tray of vials, jars, and bags of various magical and natural substances. Harry was mumbling something to himself, but he stopped when Hermione approached. At her questioning look, he said, “I was just trying to remember if there was a better alternative to using crushed pomegranate seeds to neutralize the corrosive qualities of the rot-weed.”

Hermione, for once, knew what he was talking about. It was rather frustrating, but no matter how much she studied, she simply didn’t possess the initiative ability that Harry had when it came to Potions.

But in this instance she could remember a passage involving the limitations of crushed pomegranate seeds as a neutralizing agent. “What about...Kalas Weed?” she suggested.

Harry considered that for a moment, then smiled. “Perfect. It’s more potent than pomegranate seeds, albeit a bit more volatile. Start the water boiling and I’ll try to find some in the supply closet,” he instructed. She did as he asked, and the cauldron was bubbling when he returned. “Okay, let’s get started. Add a handful of knotgrass.”

Hermione frowned. “How much is a *handful*?”

Harry shook his head. “Knotgrass is so harmless that it doesn’t really matter.” He went back to examining the instructions. Hermione felt a bit sorry for him, but felt that this system was even more unfair to her. She wasn’t at Harry’s level, yet because they worked together, Snape would expect far more from both of them.

Trusting his judgment, she added the knotgrass, which settled into the water. She followed his instructions carefully, and once he was certain that there were no viable alternatives to the given instructions, Harry assisted her in preparing the rest of the ingredients. “It’s been almost five minutes,” he reminded her. “Get ready to add the Kalas Weed.” He went back to pulverizing the Bowtruckle branch into a fine powder, which she eventually added. The potion flashed orange, then shifted into a warm light blue. Harry smiled.

Professor Snape was now patrolling around the desks, critiquing the work of his students, and insulting them at every opportunity. He warmed up by ridiculing the pathetic half-hearted efforts of Patil and Brown. Ron was seething by the time Snape had finished lecturing to him about his creation, which, instead of being light green as it should have been, was a muddy brown with what appeared to be undissolved Knotgrass floating in it. It was utterly incomprehensible, even to Hermione, that a person could be so careless as to not actually bring the water to a boil *before* carelessly tossing in the ingredients. He then proceeded to harass his favorite target, Neville Longbottom, working with Seamus Finnegan, who wasn’t exactly a Potions Master himself. Hermione pitied both of them.

“Longbottom, I do hope that you don’t expect someone to *drink* from that. Apparently you did not understand me when I told you that we would be starting our study of venoms *next term*,” Snape said in a soft, cutting voice. “I must congratulate you for being so completely incompetent that you managed to brew something that will likely kill as fast as the Black Widow Drought. Clean out your cauldron Misters Longbottom and Finnegan. I expect a roll of parchment from both of you on my desk tomorrow detailing exactly how you created this monster.”

Leaving Neville trembling in his wake, Snape continued on to his Godson and Pansy Parkinson. “I’ve seen worse,” he said briefly. He was considerably more generous with his criticism of Blaise and Millicent. He simply nodded in satisfaction at Moon and Davis. He made a rare complimentary remark after examining the work of Greengrass and Nott. Harry and Hermione were last. Hermione added two grams of Flobberworm mucus and stirred the potion clockwise four times, as per Harry’s instructions. Snape scrutinized their work, and Hermione tried to ignore his presence, focusing on making sure they didn’t wait too long before adding their next ingredient. “Mr. Potter,” Professor began, “I would appreciate it if you might at least make an effort to actively participate in the physical aspects of brewing this Potion, but from the changes you made from the original basic instructions, I see that you have not been wasting you time. You have even outdone Miss Moon in originality. Five points to Slytherin for your initiative.”

Ron spluttered angrily from the back of the classroom. “Let me get this straight,” he said. “Potter just sits back and tells Granger what to do, you call him on it, and you *give* him five points for sitting on his arse?” Hermione knew what was coming next.

Snape rounded on him. “I will not tolerate your pathetic outbursts in class, Weasley. Twenty Points from Gryffindor for questioning my judgment, and ten more for your foul tongue. Just because I trust that Mr. Potter is, unlike yourself, capable of brewing the potion by himself, is not a reason to cry favoritism. Perhaps if you applied yourself and kept your mind away from that inane *game* you might someday be *half* of the Potions student that he is.”

Ron looked stunned for a moment. Harry whispered something in her ear. "What?" she whispered back.

"He used Legilimency," Harry said. "He locked eyes with Weasley; that's how Snape knew that he was thinking about Quidditch."

"Isn't that *illegal*?" Hermione whispered loudly. Snape turned on her this time, and sent her a withering glare. She felt a cold presence quickly enter her mind and a flash of brief pain. Her cheeks reddened with anger, but she fought to keep her emotions under control.

"Ten more points from Gryffindor, Granger. Focus on your work," he said curtly. Hermione managed to stay silent for the rest of the class, and she managed to sufficiently concentrate enough to finish the potion. Harry seemed pleased with the end product, and she felt that it was much better than anyone else's.

Hermione went up to the desk, carrying a vial of the potion, as Harry began to clean up their workspace. Snape looked up at her as she came closer. "Good," he said simply. More quietly, he whispered in a menacing tone. "Whether or not what I do is legal is *irrelevant*, Granger. If you provoke me, I will not hesitate to punish you. Do I make myself clear?"

She forced a nod, and then returned to Harry. As soon as they were out of earshot of the Potions Classroom, Hermione exploded. "The *gall* of that man," she said, letting some of her pent up rage out. "He knows full well that what he did was illegal, and just to prove a point, he used it on *me*. And then he threatened me when I went up to give him our potion. And just for good measure, he took a total of thirty points! We're probably in last place now! The man rules by terror, damn all the rules!" Hermione was panting by the end of her rant.

Harry looked sympathetic, but merely shrugged. "He is who he is," he said simply. "It doesn't make him any less of a vindictive bastard, but Dumbledore trusts him, and that seems to be all that matters."

"Of course *you* would say that," Hermione replied indignantly. "You didn't just see thirty points taken from your House and have your mental privacy violated."

Harry's cheeks turned slightly red. "Do you really think I give a damn about *points*?" he hissed. "I'm sorry for what he did to you, but I had to put up with a lot to get on his good side, and I'm not about to throw that away fighting an argument that I can't win."

Hermione was silent. *How can he stand Snape? How can he just forget how horrible that he was to him? It's not as though he has forgiven Ron!*

"Because Snape is *valuable*, and Weasley is *useless*," Harry replied to her unspoken question. She turned an accusing glare at him, but he raised his hands. "When you think like that, to a person as sensitive to fluctuations in magic as I am, you might as well be screaming it at the top of your lungs. I didn't *hear* what you said, so to speak, but I *felt* the gist of it, and made the connection."

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest. "Fine." She felt a twinge of jealousy that Harry had so much power, and that he was beginning to learn how to wield it. She hadn't even tried to use fire-related magic outside of the occasional Ignition Spell since the previous year.

Harry opened his mouth to say something, but closed it and looked away. Hermione huffed. "If you are going to say something, just say it."

"You are thinking about your own abilities, and how you haven't had a chance to develop them," Harry said simply. "I don't need any assistance to figure that out. Dumbledore did say that McGonagall would be willing to help you. If you are so anxious, what's stopping you from asking her about it?"

It was a reasonable question, but Hermione didn't really have an answer. "I guess I'm just procrastinating," she said lamely.

Harry gave her a suspicious look. "Since when do *you* procrastinate?"

Hermione didn't respond. She sighed. "I need to get to Herbology, and you should get to Charms."

Harry blinked in confusion at the change in subject, but nodded. Hermione walked back through the dungeon, images of the time

she'd nearly killed Harry with an overcharged Burning Curse flashing through her mind.

Harry had been looking forward to his first Defense Against the Dark Arts class of the year. "Mad-Eye" had received rave reviews from his first classes of students, who were impressed with his knowledge and his willingness to show them the Darker side of magic. As good as Remus had been the previous year, Harry would be lying to himself if he said that his father's friend had really tried to get his students to understand what Dark magic could do to a human being. Based on what he'd heard from Daphne, his guess was that Moody had no such inhibitions.

When he entered the classroom there were a few students milling around, anxiously looking around for their new teacher. Harry noticed that very little about the classroom had changed, saved for the addition of a few instruments he recognized as Dark Detectors, including a mini Foe Glass on Moody's desk. Harry sat down toward the back of the classroom, where the Slytherins tended to located themselves. He waved a friendly greeting to Blaise as his friend entered, and Blaise returned it, even though he was engrossed in conversation with Millicent Bulstrode. Hermione came in, her bookbag full to bursting and several textbooks in her arms. She crashed down in the desk next to him. "Library," she explained.

The rest of the class began to file in, and no sooner had they assembled than Harry heard the clicking of Moody's cane on the stone floor of the hallway. Moody entered, looking bedraggled but still menacing. His electric blue eye spun in its socket, examining all of the students that passed behind him as he made his way up to the front of the classroom. He took attendance, pronouncing each name in the same, gruff tone, though he did pause on Harry's name. Harry had gotten used to it, and hardly noticed. Once he was done, the retired Auror addressed his class. "It seems that I am inheriting a rather under-educated bunch of children," he began. "Lupin probably did the best job of the three, but that isn't saying much. I suspect you learned nothing of use from that ponce Lockhart and the traitor Quirrell. Merlin forbid Voldemort actually teach you anything of

practical use against him.” Most of the students in the class gasped when he said the name, and he glared at each and every one of them.

“How, exactly,” he began, “do you expect to combat the forces of the Dark Lord if you can’t say the bugger’s *name*?” he demanded. “It’s not a Conjuring Charm, it’s a *name*. *Voldemort!*” The word rang through the silent classroom, and the same group of people flinched.

Looking disgusted, he turned away. “As I was saying, last year you finally got something resembling a decent education in this class. Lupin covered the whole standard curriculum of Dark Creatures.”

Malfoy sniggered, but stopped as soon as both of Moody’s eyes locked with his. “You think that’s *funny*, boy? Do you? I’ll tell you this: Remus Lupin is far more of a man than your traitorous, boot-licking Death Eater father will ever be,” he snarled.

Draco turned bright red. “How *dare* you..?”

“I *dare*,” Moody replied, “because I saw Lucius Malfoy captured. And I gave a chunk of my body to take down his bodyguards, he sent, rolling up his sleeve and tracing a hideous scar on his right arm. One of my fellow Aurors gave his *life*. And you can imagine that I was none too pleased when I learned that he had paid his way out of Azkaban.”

“My father,” Draco began, “was under the Imperius Curse. He was targeted because of his stature in the pureblood community. He was declared innocent of all charges by Cornelius Fudge himself-”

“Perhaps,” Moody hissed, “if you keep repeating those lies to yourself, you’ll eventually convince yourself that they are true. Good luck convincing anyone else.”

The reaction of the class to this entire exchange varied greatly. Most of the Slytherins appeared mildly amused that Draco was entirely unable to mount an effective defense to Professor Moody’s accusations. Greengrass and Nott appeared entirely uninterested. Hermione was watching with a look of disapproval. But the rest of her fellow Gryffindors were staring at Moody in shock, and several of them, including Ron Weasley, in something resembling adoration.

Harry's anger with Ginny's idiotic brother increased. Ron didn't care at all about what was actually being discussed, he was simply enjoying Malfoy being insulted by a Professor. Ron understood very little about how the Wizarding World worked, something that Harry had little choice but to pin on his parents, who tried to shield their many children from the truth of the rampant corruption and evil imbued in the very fabric of wizarding society itself. It always intrigued Harry that Muggles had rid themselves of the system that wizarding society was stuck in centuries ago. He'd read a bit about the French Revolution, which had been a widespread revolt of the lower and middle classes against the privileged elite that had turned into decades of violence and war. In that society, too, those of noble blood had exerted dominance over those of less prestigious descent. The wizarding world, most notably in Europe, was an archaic relic of times past, and things hadn't changed for centuries. And, if history was any indication, they weren't likely to. Wizarding society was a society living within a society, one that didn't even know that they existed. Wizarding society could not be counted as an entirely distinct entity; though the lines had been drawn closer in the last few hundred years, with the establishment of the Ministries of Magic in a number of countries, ending the idea of wizards posing as Muggle politicians, inventors, and other persons of note, overlaps remained.

There were maybe 15,000 wizarding families living in Europe altogether. And the kind of dissatisfaction that had inspired the French Revolution simply did not exist. Muggle-born wizards were not used as slave labor or deprived of nourishment, as the French peasants had been. Most parents of Muggle-born witches and wizards knew little of the wizarding world, and most preferred not to associate with it, a preference that Harry could understand. After all, who would wish to immerse himself in a society where he was looked down upon for not possessing fantastic abilities that that society considered commonplace? What Harry had concluded was that unless there was a tremendous and unexpected upheaval of the wizarding world, things would remain essentially unchanged. Unless they began to marry Muggleborns in large numbers, the pureblood families would decrease in number, but there were still enough of them that it was hard to see them disappearing entirely. And those that remained would merely possess even more power.

“Planning to start paying attention, Potter?” Moody growled, his voice coming from an area of alarmingly close proximity. Harry started, emerging from his thoughts.

“Sorry, sir,” he said hurriedly. “I was just thinking.”

“On your own time, Mr. Potter, on your own time,” Moody replied, his magical eye unnerving at this distance. He broke eye contact and walked back to the board, tapping his walking stick on the words he’d apparently written on it. Harry read them with more than a twinge of surprise. *The Unforgivable Curses*. Ron sniggered at his lapse of concentration. Moody turned on him.

“Weasley, since you obviously know all of this, else you wouldn’t be fooling around in my class, you go first,” he said. “Name one of them.”

Surprisingly, it didn’t take him long to come up with an answer. “The Imperius Curse,” he said, his voice shaking a bit.

Moody nodded, tracing the letters on the board with his wand. “You would know that one,” he said. “Gave your father and the rest of the Ministry quite a problem during the war.” His magical eye again landed on Malfoy.

He picked up a jar containing a spider and removing the lid, set it upside-down on the desk. He lifted the jar and the spider began trying to run across the desk. Moody used an Immobilizing Charm to hold it in place. Then, he drew back his arm and cast, shouting “*Imperio!*”

Harry, somewhat stunned to see that Moody had actually used an Unforgivable at all, let alone in *class*, watched as the spider began to jump up and down, doing cartwheels in the air, and a number of other feats that would have been normally impossible. Many of the students in the class began laughing. Moody smiled evilly. “You think that’s *funny*, do you? Well, how would you like it if I did it to *you*.” That statement was met with complete silence.

“Total control,” Moody began. “That is what the Imperius Curse is about. It has been used in the past to force innocent people or wizards of good morals to commit heinous acts and take the blame for it. It is especially difficult to combat because the only symptom of

a person that has been placed under it in the past is acute memory loss. Earlier in history, memory loss was incorrectly assumed to always be the result of a Memory Charm, one that the accused could have cast on themselves. It's dangerous, but many still did it. And so a lot of innocent people spent time in Azkaban. The physical symptoms of a person under the influence of the Imperius Curse are milky-white eyes and flat speech. It can be used by anyone anywhere, so remember...*CONSTANT VIGILANCE!*" he bellowed.

Many of the students jumped. Harry had been waiting for it, and hardly reacted. It was Moody's motto, and Daphne said he repeated it like a prayer. "Next?" he asked. A number of people raised their hands, including Hermione. Moody was about to call on her when abruptly he pointed to...Neville, whose hand was surprisingly raised.

Harry had a feeling of surprise and dread. "Longbottom, right?" Moody asked, his voice considerably less gruff than usual. Neville nodded, but Harry could see the sweat glistening on his forehead.

"The...the Cruciatus Curse," he whispered. Moody nodded gravely.

"The Torture Curse, is has also been called," Moody said. "The sensation of being under it is not one I would care to describe to you. I would hope that you never have to endure it." He stared pointedly at Harry, but left unsaid, *except for those who already have*. "It is, in my opinion, the foulest of the Unforgivables. The desire to kill, to take a life, can be a temporary thing. But to use the Cruciatus Curse long enough to cause permanent damage, which can include complete disintegration of mental processes and rational thought, in other words, total insanity, or even physical symptoms, particularly if the curse is targeted at one area repeatedly. It often causes internal damage and bleeding from the ears, nose, and mouth. It can cause paralysis if targeted at the spine. If sustained past the destruction of the victim's mind, it can kill. And I assure you, there is no more brutal and agonizing way to die. Even curses that cause dismemberment produced a quick death."

He dumped another spider onto the desk. "This needs to be larger for you to understand," he said. "*Engorgio!*" The spider tripled in size,

becoming as large as an average tarantula. Ron shrank back in fear. Ginny had mentioned that he hated spiders. "*Crucio!*"

The spider began to convulse and writhe in silent agony, but even as it did memories flashed through Harry's mind. He saw Quirrell standing over him. He saw *Daphne* standing over him. He flinched, and felt Hermione's hand squeezing his shoulder. Then he heard her cry, "*That's enough!*"

Harry blinked in confusion, and saw that Hermione was looking at Neville, who looked like he was about to faint. Moody gave both of them a sympathetic look, then shrank the spider and returned it to its jar.

There was a long silence. "Does anyone know the last one?" he asked. Hermione raised her hand, but he called on Harry. "Mr. Potter?"

"*Avada Kedavra*," Harry said quietly. "The Killing Curse." Many of eyes in the classroom, including Moody's magical eye, flicked upward to the scar on his forehead. But at the moment, it was his second encounter with that curse that he was recalling. He'd come within inches of death, protected only by the small blood-red stone he'd carried in his pocket.

Harry watched, his face emotionless, as Moody drew out a spider, placed it on the desk, drew his wand back, and cried, "*Avada Kedavra!*" The sickly green jet of light struck the spider and enveloped it. The energy vanished, revealing the spider lying on its back, motionless. Dead, with no visible marks.

"These curses are not the Darkest you'll ever encounter," Moody said. "There are others, such as the Flesh Eating Curse, the Flesh-Shredding Curse, and the Mind Death Curse." Hermione stiffened at the last. "But these three are the only ones guaranteed to get you thrown into Azkaban without a sentencing hearing. Once a jury convicts you, you have no appeals, you have no possibility of lesser punishment. The only choice is life-long incarceration in Azkaban."

The bell rang. No one got up to leave. "Remember what I've told you. *Constant Vigilance*. Dumbledore asked me to show these to you so that you would be prepared for what lies ahead. Next class, there will

be a test, but nothing involving memorizing what you learned today. It will be a far more challenging test. You are dismissed.”

The students slowly got up to leave. Harry rose and found his legs a bit shaky, but he walked easily. Neville was still sitting at his desk, staring straight ahead, his eyes unfocused. Harry and Hermione made to approach him, but Moody stepped in front of them. “I’ll do it. You get to your next class.”

A/N: Ah, Snape's not exactly warm and cuddly yet. He might have a grudging respect for Harry, and a desire to help him (based on self-interest), but he's not ready to be courteous to a Gryffindor yet. And don't think for a moment that he doesn't remember Hermione's ordeal with the Mind Death Curse.

Moody taunting Draco about his father, and embarrassing him, is a much more Moody-ish way to get revenge on the son of Lucius Malfoy than turning him into a Ferret. As humorous as that was, it didn't have a place in this story.

Giselle Reisor's importance won't become evident until about book six, but she'll be a constant source of confusion for Harry, and, I suspect, for my readers.

Ginny's still shaken up from what she witnessed in the Forest.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter 6: Waiting

Harry sat in the Hogwarts Library, alone, reading the first of Miner's books. He had chosen this location for two reasons. First, Draco Malfoy was quite unlikely to be in here unless he had forgotten about a Transfiguration homework assignment. Second, it was quiet, and he had a chance to be alone and to think. Hermione was at Arithmacy, Ginny was at Care of Magical Creatures, and Snape was not in his office and had left a note on his door telling Harry and Elisha that they had the day off, and so Harry finally had some time to sit alone in a corner of the library and continue to educate himself about the history and culture of the Goblins. At least, he had *thought* that he was alone.

"Interesting reading material," the girl said. "Not exactly what I'd be expecting the Boy-Who-Lived to be studying, but I suppose that an understanding of those creatures will have its uses."

Harry glanced up, not recognizing the voice. He recognized the face, though. It was Giselle Reisor. She stared at him with mild disinterest, her dark hair framing her pale visage. Harry hadn't had any interaction with her since she had first come to Hogwarts, and while he'd seen her speaking with a number of his classmates, the quiet girl didn't seem to have any steady friends. Not that that seemed to bother her, of course. Her expression, while not as deceptive of that of Daphne Greengrass, betrayed little emotion. It was something quite common to pureblood heirs and heiresses. Daphne was just a lot better at it than everyone else.

"I suppose it will," Harry replied neutrally. "Are you simply wandering through the Library, or do you want to talk to me about something?"

Giselle smiled, but it was one without much genuine warmth behind it. "Nothing in particular, Potter. I was hoping for a chance to introduce myself."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Is there something that McGonagall didn't mention about you that you wanted me to know?"

"There are a number of things about me that she doesn't know," Giselle replied, her tone cool and confident, her eyes curious and inquiring, but her expression guarded. Something wasn't *right* about

her. He couldn't sense anything unusual in her aura, but she somehow still felt out of place, as if she wasn't as young as she claimed and appeared to be. But Harry could detect no evidence to support this suspicion.

"Where did you come from, originally?" Harry asked cautiously.

Again, the girl smiled. It was something that Daphne Greengrass never did, yet to one with moderate skill in detecting deception and reading facial expressions and body language such as Harry, it was equally ambiguous. "More interested in me than you were letting on before, Potter?"

Harry studied her carefully. There was something about the way she asked that question that unnerved him. It wasn't quite flirtatious, but something else entirely. "You can't exactly blame me for wanting to know. You're one of the first transfer students that Hogwarts has accepted for years. Is your family foreign? Your surname sounds French."

Giselle's expression was guarded, but she nodded. "We are originally, yes. But where I went to school, and who my family is isn't of your concern, Potter. I have many secrets, and I prefer to keep them. I am also trained in Occlumency, as per the request of my father."

That threw Harry off a bit. It told him that Giselle Reisor did not merely possess good skills at observation, but also that she knew quite a bit about magic and about him personally. She understood that the amount of power he possessed gave him an almost intuitive skill with Legilimency, even if he hadn't yet attempted to do more than sense emotions and brush surface thoughts. Was his power that well known? He supposed that he shouldn't be surprised, given that many of the Hogwarts students had sensed his magical *awakening*, and most of the purebloods understood the significance of what they had felt. "We all have our secrets," he said.

Daphne Greengrass silently watched the exchange between Giselle Reisor and Harry Potter through a gap in several library books and the top of the shelf. When she felt she had heard enough, she turned and departed; her strides long yet her movements almost unheard. In

Daphne's mind, this new girl had grown even more mysterious, and that unnerved her. It had been a mere coincidence that she had been in the Library, searching for a book she needed for a Herbology essay, when she had heard Potter's voice. She hadn't taken interest until she'd heard the reply, and realized that the voice belonged to neither Ginny Weasley nor Hermione Granger, Potter's constant companions.

Her father had not instructed her to keep an eye on Potter, but she felt that she should do so nonetheless. If her father was really ready to invest so much in her classmate she wanted to know as much as she could about him. She still doubted Aiden's wisdom on this matter. There was no doubt that Potter was immensely powerful, but Daphne wondered if he possessed the strength of will, the self-confidence, and the character to lead. She sometimes wondered if he possessed, or ever would possess, the maturity that he would need. Potter had allowed the amount of power he possessed to get to his head; that was perfectly clear. His altercation with Lucius Malfoy had demonstrated this arrogance and foolhardiness, and it was a dangerous development, particularly since Potter had emerged as the apparent victor. The impotence of his pathetic excuse for an heir aside, Lucius Malfoy was an exceptionally dangerous individual. And it wasn't as though she could count on Potter to be cautious.

Granger and Weasley were obviously trying to drag him back down to reality, but the way that they were doing it, and the mindset they preferred, was equally foolish and naïve. Pacifists did not win wars. Daphne had never really had a friend beyond her father, and thus she had to admit she didn't understand the protective dynamic between Granger and Potter. Nonetheless, she was skilled at analyzing human emotion. Granger wanted to keep her friend safe, to abandon all ideas of fighting in a war and hope for the best. This was a suicidal notion. War was coming, and no amount of coaxing from the Mudblood was going to change that. She had also noticed, by a combination of quiet observation and rapidly spread rumors, that Granger possessed a strong dislike of Blaise Zabini. Daphne, in a way, shared some of that animosity. Blaise was the child of two extremely powerful and influential members of the pureblood community. His mother was one of the few living Songstresses, while his father was a renowned Illusionist. Yet Blaise remained remarkably

uneducated about Wizarding society. was And even worse, Potter seemed to view him as an asset. In short, he was already going in the wrong direction, and the only people giving him advice, with the possible exception of the Grey Maiden, were pulling him in different, yet equally wrong directions.

She rounded a corner and caught sight of Theodore Nott striding towards her. The boy possessed a strange attraction, one that at the same time enraptured and disturbed her. He was not physically repulsive, but it was the aura of the unknown that surrounded him that fascinated her. He rarely spoke, but when he did, he always made deep and thoughtful assertions. He spent much of his time observing the people around him, almost as if he didn't feel that he truly existed in the realm of society. Theodore smiled slightly as she walked by.

Arranged marriages between pureblood families for the purpose of forming alliances, consolidating wealth or re-establishing old ties was not as common as it had once been, but that wasn't to say it was unheard of. She didn't know for sure, but she guessed that Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson would one day be wed, uniting two of the more powerful Dark families. Aiden had never mentioned any possibility of marrying his only daughter off, so Daphne assumed she would be free to find love from wherever it came. She had often wondered why he had given her that choice; arranged marriages had been a part of the Greengrass line for centuries. Her only guess was that because those marriages had a tendency to estrange parents from their unhappy children, Aiden didn't want to risk losing his only remaining family. It was not a matter of affection or love; arranged marriages were made with a purpose, one that would ultimately benefit a family. And one of the most fundamental ideals that her father had instilled in her was that she, as his only surviving heir, was responsible for passing on the Greengrass bloodline, if not the family name itself. Most pureblood children learned this, and accepted it.

Daphne typically spent little time pondering who her future husband might be. But the sight of Theodore Nott had a strange tendency to send her thoughts drifting in that direction.

Harry had to admit that he was a bit disappointed that the Triwizard Tournament had led to the cancellation of the Hogwarts Quidditch season. A great deal of that disappointment stemmed from the fact that he would have undoubtedly been named Captain and Ginny undoubtedly would have made the team as a starting Chaser. It wasn't as though she had much competition. Harry, unlike Flint, wasn't exactly concerned with the way that Ethan Montague might react if his son failed to secure a starting job, for the stated reason that he might lose a race with a puddle of stagnant water. Nor was he particularly inclined to choose Crabbe and Goyle as his Beaters when they were neither skilled nor exactly the kind of people he wanted to trust with his life. Anne Grunitch could smash a Bludger harder than they could punch someone in the face.

He soared high through the air on his worn, but trusty Nimbus. The sun was setting to the west, golden light spilling over the rolling Scottish hills and reflected off the windows of the distant castle, bathing it in a fiery orange glow. The clouds above displayed a brilliant crimson wash that contrasted sharply with the remaining blue in the sky. It was quite a sight to behold. Only the frigid winds of the approaching, though still distant winter, prevented Harry from feeling completely at piece.

There would be no Quidditch this year, but Harry wasn't exactly planning to abandon the use of his broomstick. He did another loop around the deserted Quidditch Pitch, the wind howling through the creaking wooden grandstands. Truth be told, the real reason that he was out here in the fading light of this Sunday evening was because he was procrastinating. He had a particularly challenging Transfiguration essay to write when he got back to the Slytherin Common Room. He decided on that location because he felt he had a better chance of keeping secret from Hermione the fact that he had forgotten about an assignment given to them at the beginning of the week, one she had completed four days ago.

A small figure moved out of one of the locker rooms carrying a broom. Harry only needed to see the strands of flame-red hair that had escaped her wool hat to figure out who it was. He descended slowly, a grin on his face. Ginny smiled back. "Did Hermione send you out here to bodily drag me back to the Library?" he asked.

Ginny looked confused. "Good, I'll take that as a No," Harry said. "Just came out to do some flying?"

She nodded, but her expression was one of amusement. "You're hiding from her? Out *here*? Why not pick a spot that she can't access, like say...our Common Room?"

Harry laughed. "Because then I might be tempted to stop procrastinating and actually *finish* the Transfiguration essay that McGonagall assigned last Monday."

"You've *started* it?" Ginny asked, sounding as though she didn't believe him.

Harry shook his head. "Of course not. I've never worked until the wee hours of the morning before. There's a first time for everything, after all. And I'm feeling lazy and anxious."

Ginny circled around him on the rickety school broom, raising an eyebrow. "Anxious?" she asked, a bit of concern slipping into her voice.

Harry shrugged, hovering casually in the air a few feet from her. "I'm waiting for it to begin."

Ginny frowned. "Which? The War or the Tournament?"

"Both," Harry answered truthfully. "I know that I won't participate directly in the latter, but it will still be quite interesting and engaging. As for the former...that's always on my mind. It's strange. I'm almost sick of not knowing what's going to happen next, not knowing when this peace we've been enjoying for thirteen years is going to end. Yet, I don't want it to end. There's a joy that I gain from just being another student, learning things and interacting with my classmates that I've never really appreciated before."

"I suppose that's a good thing to hear you say," Ginny said. She paused. "I'll kill you if you ever bring this up in front of Hermione, but I have a lot of trouble not agreeing with you at times. I still think you are a bit overconfident, and think you were idiotic to challenge Lucius Malfoy, but I also feel like Hermione is kind of refusing to accept the

fact that just because something is deeply, fundamentally *unfair*, doesn't mean that its not going to happen."

"I'm glad for that," Harry told her. "It's tough arguing with both of you all of the time."

"We're just worried about you. You mean so much to both of us, and we don't want to lose you and feel that we could have done something about it," Ginny told him, raising her voice a bit so that she could be heard over a sudden gust of wind.

"I appreciate that," Harry said. "But you have to trust me sometimes. The Goblins and I have...a connection. And I have a far better chance of exploiting that connection if I understand their culture, history, and traditions. Miner is one of the few authors who have ever explored the Goblins from a different perspective."

"Is the *possibility* of exploiting that connection really worth dying for?" Ginny asked softly. "What if Lucius hadn't let you go? What if Daphne had never sworn a Vow of Vengeance?"

Harry frowned. "I don't understand where you are going with this."

Ginny made a noise of exasperation. "Oh bloody hell, do you *really* expect me to believe that you consciously analyzed the situation, or even had time to do so?" she said, putting her hands on her hips as she held the broom steady with her knees.

"I brought it up during our...conversation," Harry pointed out.

"Does that matter? You still made the choice to stand up to a person that could probably wipe the floor with you in a duel, if not worse, and who is also an extremely dangerous criminal that escaped a cell in Azkaban because of his bulging money bag. That just isn't that smart an idea, Harry. That's putting aside the fact that Draco, Crabbe, and Goyle were also with him. You wouldn't have stood a chance, and you know it. Yet you risked it. And yes, you won out in the end," Ginny admitted, "but at what cost? Did you really need Lucius Malfoy to hold a grudge against you? For some *books*?"

Harry opened his mouth to respond, but couldn't think of anything coherent to defend his actions. Ginny had made a pretty good argument. He didn't want to admit it, but he was beginning to think that his escape had been a matter of luck, not skill or reputation. Until he learned to control his power, it was just there as a weapon of last resort. And he hadn't really considered that even if he managed to beat Lucius, in his weakened state he'd have little chance against Draco, who wasn't exactly an inexperienced duelist. "Why is it that I'm tempted to agree with you, when I couldn't even begin to think I was wrong on the train?" he asked under his breath.

Ginny apparently picked up enough to answer the question. "Because I went about it a different way. One of Hermione's problems is that she almost unconsciously goes for the areas where it hurts the most. That makes you defensive. Believe me, when you are defensive, you aren't going to listen to anyone else."

Again, Harry couldn't really think of a response. She was right. "What's your point?" he asked, swooping around her again, relieving some of his nervous energy. This conversation was becoming uncomfortable.

"So are you admitting it might not have been the best idea to antagonize Lucius Malfoy?" Ginny asked, tossing her hair back over her shoulder. Harry was distracted by that for a moment, which brought more questions to his mind.

"I...suppose," Harry said, trying to recover his composure and train of thought. "But those books *are* extremely valuable."

Ginny sighed. "Harry, that might be true, but again, I'm not really trying to get you to apologize for that particular incident. I've been thinking for a long time about how to approach this. It's a pattern of reckless behavior that I'm concerned about. Putting my own feelings for you aside, and using your own reasoning of your importance to the future of the wizarding world, it's not very difficult to argue that your actions were potentially *more* dangerous."

Harry sighed. "I'll have to think about this."

“Do that,” Ginny said. “And, as an added reason, if you *are* indeed a Slytherin, it might be best to act like one. As you fully understand, Slytherins are not merely about deception and political gamesmanship. There is an innate instinct for self-preservation that hasn’t exactly been evident in your actions.”

Harry did another loop. This time she followed, moving in the opposite direction. The two of them spun around one another, each a blue of motion to the other’s eyes. The wind howled, chilling both of them to the bone. Finally, they stopped, hovering opposite from one another, with Ginny about six feet higher in the air. “Well,” Harry began, trailing off. “Thank you. Really, thanks a lot. I guess you weren’t joking when you said you were good at reading people.”

Ginny smiled, her face brightening. Harry was struck at that moment by how attractive she really was, even at only thirteen. He quickly tried to get that out of his mind, but the thoughts were far less alien than they had seemed a year ago. Maybe he *did* have a bit of a thing for Ginny Weasley. It was yet another thing that he would be spending time thinking about in the days to come.

Ginny descended rapidly to the ground, landing lightly, and Harry joined her on the turf of the Quidditch Pitch. They walked back to the castle, the topic of their conversation something far less philosophical.

“Mr. Potter, do pay attention!” Professor McGonagall’s voice jolted Harry out of a short reverie. He’d been pondering what it might be like to participate in the Triwizard Tournament. He’d promised Ginny and Hermione *not* to think about it, but as the date approached that the other schools would be arriving, he found it increasingly difficult to keep that promise. It was a nice distraction to the nightmares that plagued him with increasing frequency and vividness. Nightmares in the weeks approaching Halloween were nothing new to Harry, and he was fairly certain they came from within his own mind, and were not sent by his nemesis. He tried to hide the physical symptoms of his lack of sleep, and so far even Hermione had not commented,, though the aforementioned Gryffindor bookworm was currently glaring at him from over her cactus.

"Sorry, Ma'am," Harry got out quickly. Hermione's glare was unrelenting.

The Transfiguration Professor gave him a curt nod, and continued to introduce today's lesson. Harry tried to read Hermione's notes over her shoulder, but sensing what he was doing, and not wanting to reward him for daydreaming, she moved them so that her body obstructed his view. Frustrated, he tried to remember the last thing he'd listened to McGonagall say while following the instructions she was giving at the moment. He ignored the snickering of Ron Weasley and Draco Malfoy.

"...Now that we have covered various transformations of animals and plants, mostly concerning transfiguring them into objects similar in size, texture, and shape, it is time to attempt slightly more difficult Transfiguration magic. Much of our work before the Christmas Break will involve the use of Switching Spells. The key point to remember is that *two* objects are affected. You cannot use a Switching Spell to transfigure the teeth of a dragon in the mouth of a dog without also switching the dragon's teeth to that of the dog. These spells have a large variety of uses, including some in combat." She paused. "How might that be, Mr. Potter?" She was obviously testing to make sure he was still paying attention. Harry didn't take it personally; McGonagall treated all of her students equally...well, maybe she was a *bit* partial to her Gryffindors, particularly Hermione.

Harry tried to think of a decent answer to the question, though to be honest, it wasn't one that he had pondered much. Transfiguration had never really struck him as a field of magic he'd really use that often. It was a fascinating and difficult subject, but besides becoming an animagus, Harry wasn't sure of its practical uses. "Well...I suppose one could, with a small pond and dry ground, use a switching spell to make an opponent lose his balance."

McGonagall eyed him critically, but nodded. Harry thought he saw a trace of a smile. "Very good. That is an offensive use of Switching Spells, and a creative one at that. I can attest to its effectiveness. Mr. Longbottom, could you name another?"

Beads of sweat shined off the nervous boy's forehead. "Well...could you say...transfigure a knife into a stick, if someone was attacking you? Or vice versa: give yourself a weapon?"

Malfoy sneered. "I suppose that might work for one as incapable with a wand as you."

McGonagall shot him one of her patented glares. "Perhaps, Mr. Malfoy, you might wish to provide another. And I will add that Mr. Longbottom's example is a fine one. If you find yourself evenly matched in a duel, using weapons other than your wand can be quite effective, and briefly give the wielder the advantage of surprise."

"Well," Draco drawled. "Couldn't you take Potter's little scenario and replace the water with something actually *dangerous*? Like acid or lava?" Malfoy looked pleased with himself. McGonagall frowned.

"I suppose that if you were fighting on the precipice of a volcano that might be possible. However, that would be extremely impractical. You seem to have forgotten the cardinal rule of Switching Spells: You cannot transfigure only one object; *two* must be affected in opposing ways. Perhaps you might be better served coming up with your own examples instead of borrowing from others," the Transfiguration Professor said sternly.

She gathered her thoughts, and began. "Mr. Longbottom's example brings up something that I hadn't intended to touch upon, but still feel is important to impress upon you. Your wand is your friend, there is no doubt about it. Even if you eventually master the extraordinarily difficult skill of wandless magic, something that few ever do, you will rely upon it to sustain your ability to perform magic. Wandless magic is extremely draining, and few can cast more than a few simple spells. My point is this: I have seen many young wizards fall because they become so reliant on their wands that they become incapable of fighting with anything else. They simply stand there and cast spells and hope that they will triumph. This is not a dueling class, nor is this Professor Moody's subject. But even in competitive dueling, which many adult wizards still engage in to settle disputes, unpredictability is a valuable trait."

After she felt that had sunk in, she continued with the lesson. “Now, as you might expect, Switching Spells have many uses not associated with fighting. Think of simply redecorating a house or even altering clothing by combining elements from different pairs of robes.”

Finally, her lecture concluded, Professor McGonagall gave her instructions for the in-class exercises. “You will each be given two potted plants, a cactus and a small fir tree. I wanted you to use the Switching Spell to switch the cactus’s spines with the needles of the fir tree, like so.”

She drew her wand from her robes and pointed the tip at the cactus, “*Commuto*,” she said slowly, for the benefit of the class. Harry watched as the spines of the cactus shrank back into the skin, while simultaneous the needles of the fir tree retracted back into its branches. Once both has disappeared, they re-emerged, but this time, the spines grew back on the fir tree, and the pine needles poked out from the cactus. Many in the class looked intimidated by the task set before them. McGonagall enlisted the help of Lavender Brown and Seamus Finnegan in handing out the plants.

Harry set to work, pulling out his Transfiguration textbook and reviewing the introduction to Switching Spells. Like most Transfiguration magic, the most important factor was not magical ability, but confidence and clear thought. Neville Longbottom’s struggles with the subject came from the fact that he simply didn’t cast his spells with conviction, or have any confidence that he could successfully perform them. Therefore, it was not surprising that he was unable. It struck Harry that it had been quite a long time since he’d last spoken to the shy Gryffindor. Perhaps he should change that.

Later, Harry reminded himself. He skimmed the remainder of the page, and found a few helpful hints concerning the way to hold his wand and how to properly focus. He glanced over at Hermione, who was already casting away. Her first attempt yielded nothing, and she was visibly frustrated. She normally excelled at Transfiguration.

Harry closed his eyes, envisioning a spiky fir tree and a cactus covered in pine needles. He opened his eyes and swiped his wand

downward at a diagonal, casting, "*Commuto!*" He watched with some relief as the pine needles on the fir tree retracted slightly. The cactus was unaffected. He tried again, and the pine needles retracted all the way this time. The spines on the cactus remained stubbornly unchanged. "*Finite,*" he sighed, canceling the last two spells. The pine needles returned. He decided to focus on the cactus. Again he glanced at Hermione. She'd made some progress, which was more than could be said for most of the class. He had to stifle a chuckle at the look Draco Malfoy was giving his cactus, a mixture of loathing, surprise and irritation.

He cast again, aiming the swiping motion of his wand arm at the cactus this time. He felt a hint of satisfaction as both the spines of the cactus and the needles of the fir tree retracted. Then he had a thought. Normally, it was not a good idea to try to overcharge a Transfiguration spell, but this one seemed to require more than just concentration and visualization. He summoned a bit of the power he kept lurking in the back of his magical core, then cast again. There was a small flash of light from the tip of his wand, and Harry felt the familiar, extremely soothing rush of power. The effects were immediate. In a split second, the spines had been transplanted onto the fir tree, which now appeared quite deadly, and dark green needles protruded from the cactus.

Hermione, whose attention had been drawn by the flash of light, was looking on in astonishment. "How did you do that?" she whispered, awed. "I still can't get both to change at the same time. Did you use a different wand motion?"

"I used my...*abilities,*" Harry said in a quick whisper. Hermione frowned. The use of her *abilities* would most likely result in the cactus and fir tree being burned to ashes.

Professor McGonagall was also staring at him strangely. "Excellent work, Mr. Potter. I must admit it has been quite a while since I saw someone execute the spell correctly during the first class. Your father would be proud. 10 points to Slytherin."

Harry was amused for a moment by the thought that while James might have been proud of his Transfiguration feat, he would have

been repulsed by the idea of his flesh and blood earning points for Slytherin House. Apparently, most of the Gryffindors weren't too pleased either. And a few of the Slytherins seemed to believe that they should have gotten more.

"Bloody cheat," Ron Weasley hissed, quite audibly, from the back of the classroom. There was no way that McGonagall's animagus-enhanced hearing was going to miss that one. She turned a fierce glare on him, and while he continued to stew, he stayed silent for the remainder of the class, save for a few muttered curses and grunts of frustration. Harry noticed Daphne Greengrass eying him appreciatively, almost expressing approval of his use of magic. Malfoy was trying to bore a pair of holes into his back with his eyes.

It was inevitable that the two of them would eventually clash. Draco was the unofficial leader of the 4th year Slytherins, due far more to his father than to any merits of his own. Even Daphne and Theodore tended to defer to him, even if they mocked his pompous attitude and foolish behavior when he wasn't there. Lucius Malfoy commanded a tremendous amount of respect in the Dark pureblood community, and not merely because he had once been one of Voldemort's top Death Eaters. Harry understood that in order to win over his housemates, he would have to hurt the younger Malfoy's standing. He was as yet unsure of how to do that; Quidditch meant nothing in this context. Defeating the boy in a duel was a logical option, but that carried with it a number of potential consequences Harry wasn't sure he wanted to face, not to mention that school rules forbid them under most circumstances.

No, humiliating Draco Malfoy was going to take all of his cunning and careful forethought. It was not something to be rushed. Harry was growing into his role as a Slytherin, but he still had a ways to go. His impulsivity could get him into trouble at times.

Harry put the thought out of his mind and decided to focus on other things for the time being. He anxiously awaited the arrival of the students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang and the beginning of the Triwizard Tournament. He had to admit, a bit embarrassedly, that he was looking forward to having a chance to meet Viktor Krum (he assumed the young man would be part of the delegation.) Krum's star

had scarcely been dimmed by the World Cup debacle; dozens of articles and columns had been written about his play, both admonishing him for making such a costly error and extolling how well he'd actually performed up to that point, stressing that he wasn't even twenty and just needed time. But the overwhelming consensus was that he was still the most talented and intuitive Seeker in professional Quidditch, and that once he gained experience, he would be an all-time great.

Slightly bored, Harry decided to try to reverse his earlier Switching Spell. He repeated the mental preparation, reaching deep within his core for some additional power and feeling that pleasant jolt of energy washing over his body like a splash of warm water. With Hermione (who had managed to nearly complete the spell after multiple attempts) curiously watching, he cast the spell. The results were not as good as he'd hoped; somehow, he'd ended up altering the spines *and* the needles so that both were now half fir needle and half cactus spine. Both plants looked rather strange. Harry frowned. "Mr. Potter, that's actually not that bad an effort. Reversing the effects of a Switching Spell is far more difficult than casting it in the first place." She didn't award points this time, though Harry felt he was probably deserving of some. McGonagall was a Gryffindor at heart, and always would be, and provided she was reasonably fair, he would respect that.

He waited around until the bell rang and McGonagall dismissed the class. He packed up his things in his bag and had just gotten outside the door when he heard the familiar sour voice of Weasley. "Bet you're really proud of yourself, aren't you, Potter?" he said, taking a step toward him. It occurred to Harry that the gangly redhead was several inches taller than he was. But this wasn't a competition of physical strength; *hopefully*, it wouldn't be one of magical power either. He was in no mood to be dragged in front of Dumbledore to explain why he'd sent Ron Weasley to the Hospital Wing...as Snape had so eloquently put it, "In a matchbox." Harry didn't respond to the Gryffindor's initial taunt. He simply stared at Weasley, with an amused look. As Harry had intended, it seemed to make him even more irritated. "Aren't you going to bother answering me?" he demanded. "Or are you scared to lose those ten points that you swindled out of McGonagall."

"That's not the proper use of the word, Ronald," Hermione said in her best grammar school teacher voice.

"Do you think I care?" Ron asked, turning to her, incredulous. Harry figured that Hermione was trying to prevent a scene. "You should be ashamed of yourself, you know? I know he's your friend, but he's cheating and getting Slytherin points they don't deserve...on top of all the garbage points that Snape gives them."

Hermione glared at him. Harry spoke, his tone as amused as his expression. "You still seem to be under the impression that I cheated, Weasley. I wasn't aware that having superior talent was against school rules."

"Why you little..." Ron growled. Then he flashed a nasty smile. "At least you are a good influence on my baby sister, Potter," he said, sarcasm gushing from his tone. "What with all the nightmares she's been suffering." At Harry's puzzled expression, he said. "Oh, what? You didn't know? She's woken up half the bloody house with her screaming."

Harry kept his gaze even and level. It was far more effective at annoying Ron than an angry stare would be. Inside, his mind was racing. Hermione didn't seem surprised, and Harry supposed after a brief amount of that that *he* shouldn't be; the two girls were bound to share things with each other that they kept from him. "I'm sorry about that," Harry said. He grinned. "I suppose the lack of sleep is supposed to be your excuse for your lack of a haircut? Might want to keep that off your eyes, Weasley. Wouldn't want you walking into a wall or off the Divination Tower."

Ron turned bright red. "Mum says it looks handsome."

Harry grinned. "As if she'd say anything else," he shot back.

Hermione sighed, rolling her eyes. "C'mon, let's go," she said. Harry ignored her. Weasley had been asking for this for a long time. It wasn't that hard to humiliate him either. He decided not to sink to Malfoy's level and left money out of the equation. He'd be insulting Ginny, too, if he did that, and the truth was that he really didn't care about how much money a family had. The Dressler and Potter family

fortunes were as large as they were for the sole reason that there were very few members left alive to draw from them.

“Maybe you should take better care of my sister, Potter, before Fred and George make your life a bit...uncomfortable.”

“Maybe you should finally figure out that Ginny doesn’t need a caretaker. She’s thirteen, Weasel, not three,” Harry said.

“That’s enough,” Hermione interrupted. “C’mon.”

Harry allowed himself to be led away. His rivalry with the moronic Gryffindor wasn’t one he really took seriously anymore. He’d proven himself far too immature to ever be anything more than a pesky, irritating gnat.

It had been a long time since Daphne Dressler had last set foot on the small, wooded property that had once included a modest, two-story house where Edmond and she had made their home. Both of them had been heavily involved in the Order, and they had decided that it would be best if they forswore Dressler Manor in favor of a less conspicuous home. They had considered using a Secret Keeper, but had decided against it, feeling it unnecessary. But they had been wrong, dreadfully wrong. Someone within the Order, likely Peter Pettigrew, had betrayed their location, and Voldemort had sent a squad of elite Death Eaters to rid himself of two of the Order’s best duelists and the Ministry’s ace Auror, who had already sent quite a few of his servants into incarceration in Azkaban or out of this life entirely.

Daphne struggled to repress her memories as she walked up the stone path towards what was left of their home. Grass had already begun to reclaim the flat stones that she walked upon, and the path through the woods that had once been large enough for Rubeus Hagrid to comfortably fit through was now overgrown with vegetation. She had to clear the way with several Cutting Spells as she made her way through the dimly-lit woods. Even though Autumn had stripped the leaves from many of their leaves, little sun shined through the thick trees.

Finally, she broke through the darkness into a bright clearing. Her eyes adjusted quickly to the sunlight, and she felt it beat upon her back, heating her navy blue robe on this unseasonably warm day. Unfazed, she continued her silent trek up the mossy path. She tried to mentally prepare herself, but the sight of her home, the place where she had lost her beloved husband, still brought painful memories to the front of her mind. She stared wistfully at the dilapidated structure. The second story had collapsed in upon itself, though from the damage it had sustained during the battle or the elements, she could not say. The windows were all broken, little remaining but shards of glass caught in the frame. The front door was not visible. Gaping holes in the siding, entire walls blasted outward, the edges singed black, bore witness to the ferocity of the battle that had been waged here. She no longer felt the power of the wards pulsing around her, and wondered what could possibly be left inside. Surely the place had been ransacked by vandals, Muggle and wizard alike. Save for the one item that she had come to retrieve. If someone had been able to breach Lily Potter's security spells, even as old as they were, she'd eat her owl.

Slowly, she walked up the front porch, which was remarkably intact, save for the lack of a door. That, she found lying on its side just inside the house, the hinges still attached. The house was lit only by sunlight that filtered in through the shattered windows and perforated walls and floor. She walked into a patch of light and glance up, surprised to see the blue sky above her. What should have been there was their bedroom. Obviously, it was not intact.

Taking several deep breaths, and letting them out slowly, she walked into the living room. Her eyes traced over the deep gouges in the wall and what was left of the expensive furniture. Strangely, the scar on the right side of her face, the one that bisected her eye and had robbed her of her beauty, as well as its brother, the one that ran from her left cheek about halfway down her left breast, ached dully, as if sensing that this was where they had come into being. Daphne glanced down at the floor, half expecting to see puddles of crimson blood at her feet, but thankfully, she saw nothing. She glanced over at the walls, but the elements had erased the evidence of human death. She only wished the rain could wipe away her memories that easily. She glanced nostalgically up the stairway, which was slanted

and warped from the collapse of the second floor, the same one that she had hurtled down only to find Edmond's body and no less than eight Death Eaters waiting for her. She remembered little after that, her memories merely a blur of sound, color, and pain, as the Dark Magic had gripped her mind, seizing her power and inflicting the same pain that she felt on those who had caused her to suffer so. But she remembered vividly sitting in a fetal position in the waiting room of St. Mungo's, her hands still coated in blood. She had refused the doctor's request to heal her wounds; she'd been consumed by an urge not to *allow* herself to forget what had happened.

As if I ever really could.

She wasn't sure if she regretted that decision. Beauty had never been more than a tool for her, a way of getting on the good graces of men of the opposite sex - and also distracting members of her own gender. She had cared about her appearance for Edmond's sake alone. And in her current situation, the ability to intimidate others with her physical flaws had its own uses.

She chastised herself for being so distracted. She had come here with one purpose in mind, and she'd still not accomplished it. There would be time to reminisce later. Slowly, she walked through the destroyed living room, glass shards and pieces of wood crunching loudly under the heels of her dragon-hide boots. She approached the entrance to the cellar. To her dismay, the door had been forced open, likely by thieves. She quickened her pace, but was cautious as she crept down the creaking wood steps into the basement. She didn't need to fall through and break a leg. She'd suffered enough pain today.

Daphne made it safely to the bottom, stepping into complete and utter darkness. The Grey Maiden drew her wand, whispering a Lighting Charm. Her glowing wand tip illuminated the stone cellar. As she'd suspected, what possessions that had been down here, at least, those in the open, had been pilfered by persons unknown. Only pieces of cloth, shards of wood, pottery, and metal remained, littering the floor. Unfazed, she stepped forward so that she was in the middle of the small room. She used her wand to count the tiles on the floor, estimating where the cracks were obscured by dust. Confident that

she had found the right place, she twirled her wand in a half circle, then reversed the motion. As she did this, she whispered, "*Erotis Selak.*" The password, one that Edmond had suggested, meant nothing to Daphne. Edmond had claimed it was a Goblin saying, though he didn't have the slightest clue what it meant.

With a grinding sound of stone on stone, two of the tiles sank into the ground, sliding underneath those to either side of them. She peered down into the hidden compartment, and felt a rush of adrenaline. It was still there.

Carefully, she bent down and removed the heavy object. Using her strong legs, she lifted it out of its hiding place. She blew on the exterior, removing decades of accumulated filth. That revealed strange runes carved into the stone bowl. Inside the pensieve, as bright as they were when Daphne had taken them from her head, the memories of a eighteen-year old Daphne O'Connor floated, twirling around in complicated patterns.

She had never explained to Harry why she hadn't told him about his parents, in particular, what they had been like as school children. It was simple, really. She didn't possess those memories any more. During her training with Moody, she had often been distracted by her memories of Hogwarts, memories that she suspected her mind drew upon to sooth the stress she was under from Moody's merciless instruction. The veteran Auror had finally lost patience with her and presented her with an old pensieve, one he claimed had belonged to his father. Daphne had carefully removed most of her memories of Hogwarts, save for memories of her classes, the Siege of Hogwarts, and a few other sentimental moments. Lily had been unhappy with the idea, but understood that it was necessary.

Now, she had returned to the place of her greatest failure to find out where it had all gone wrong. She was consumed by the urge to discover the exact moment when Peter Pettigrew had first began to turn traitor. She realized that because these were *her* memories, that critical moment might not appear. But at least she could find a time and a context for his betrayal. She hoped to come to understand what had caused it, so that she would be prepared in the future. She wanted Pettigrew dead, but she also wanted to know *why* that shy,

clumsy boy had turned into a cold-blooded rat that had led his friends to their deaths.

She gathered the pensieve into her arms, closed her eyes, and Apparated back to the edge of the wards of Dressler Manor, leaving this broken remnant of her past to the elements once more.

Seated cross-legged on the floor of her study in Dressler Manor, Daphne stared down into the cloudy grey mass in the large stone bowl before her. She twirled her wand around in the pensieve, searching for two specific memories. She couldn't be sure that they were the ones she wanted to find; after all, because she'd removed the memories, she had only a vague recollection of the event, no detail whatsoever. She continued to sort through her memories, channeling her magic down through her wand into the swirling energy. Finally, she thought she had found the first of the two she wanted to examine. She still wasn't sure what was so special about these two, but she let her intuition guide her in this instance. She considered simply viewing the memories from the outside, but decided that she might be able to better examine the situation by entering the bowl itself. She bent over the bowl so that her nose brushed the surface, and felt a jolt as she was yanked into the air, her corporeal form dissipating, becoming pure magical energy.

Daphne fell through the air, but landed gently. She instantly recognized where she was; she stood in the middle of the Entrance Hall of Hogwarts. The colors of the world around her were dull and a bit washed-out, reflecting the amount of time the memory had lain in the pensieve. Daphne knew that she was staring at Hogwarts as it had appeared to her eyes in 1975. There was no one around, but she was certain that would soon change. Sure enough, the great oak doors of the castle opened, and four familiar-looking boys wearing Gryffindor crests on their black school robes entered, all appearing as they had looked as fifteen year-old students (with the exception of Remus, sixteen). James Potter led the way, his hair worn in a manner identical to that of his son, hazel eyes shining with mischief behind wire-frame glasses. Behind him was Sirius Black, his stunning blue eyes almost hidden beneath his long, lanky dark hair. He walked with an arrogance that would have made his parents proud, even if they

hated everything else about him. Next was Remus Lupin, looking thin and small, his skin pale and his eyes tired. Daphne guessed that it had recently been a full moon.

Finally, Daphne noticed Peter Pettigrew. She was immediately struck by his saddened expression and sagging shoulders. In his right hand was clutched a roll of parchment. Daphne tried to recall what that note could have been.

“Oy! O’Connor!” Sirius’s voice cried. “You’re looking nice today.”

Daphne turned slowly to see a much younger, much happier version of herself. Her blonde hair was worn in an elegant and neat ponytail that trailed down her back. Her smooth visage was complemented by a pair of bright grey-green eyes that were not yet darkened by the pain of losing her family. Daphne hardly recognized herself. She knew the girl that had come to stand beside the fifteen-year old Ravenclaw instantly, however. Lily Potter looked as radiant and friendly as she always did, though her eyes were suspicious as they looked down on the Marauders.

“Thank you, Black,” her younger self replied with a false cheerfulness. Her face became a scowl. “What do you really want?”

“Somebody’s cranky today,” James snickered. The younger Grey Maiden glared at him.

“James,” she said. “Charming as always, I see. In case you care, Helena Baker has sworn to insure that you never have children. You know that her brother, a Seventh Year, and a Beater on the Slytherin team, right?” Daphne vaguely recalled the girl that she was referring to. At this time, she’d been a forth year. James had evidently pulled some sort of prank on her.

“Let’s see her try,” James said. “Actually, I’m not sure I would really mind if she got that close.” To Sirius, he said, “You think she’s cute, don’t you?”

Lily looked two parts indignant and three parts disgusted. “Ugh! And you wonder why I won’t go out with you, you scumbag. Take your perverted teenage fantasies elsewhere.”

James looked a bit surprised by the force behind that insult. "Aw, I'm hurt that you think so little of me, Evans. Speaking of hurt, did you really have to slap me that hard the last time I asked you to go to Hogsmeade."

"You deserved it," Remus said from behind him. "What were you thinking, asking her out after you sent Finnegan back to Hogwarts with her tail between her legs...literally?!"

"It was just a little prank," James protested. "And it was Peter's idea, anyway."

As thoughtless, and most likely untrue, as that remark had been, Daphne took a wild guess that it was not what had led him to betray the Potters. Peter didn't even seem to notice. Now she was intrigued. Pettigrew, desperate for attention of any kind, always reacted in some way to James's jokes or even his insults.

And as entertained as she was by the banter between the future husband and wife, she was here for other reasons. Still, there didn't seem to have been anything she had missed.

"We should get to class," Lily reminded her best friend. James frowned, crossing his arms.

"No. You two aren't going anywhere until we resolve this," he said, sticking his chest out in a rather pathetic attempt to look impressive. "I really fancy you, Evans. And I just want you to give me a chance."

Daphne's fifteen-year old self snorted in disbelief. Then she began to walk down the stairs. "You planning to stop me, Potter? I could cut you down in three second flat, and you know it."

James grinned. "You wouldn't risk it. Not one of the Golden Girls of 5th year. And your parents would be so disappointed."

Daphne was struck by how the implications of the comment were to change so much in the coming months. If he'd made that comment after their murders, she was certain she would have reduced him to a black grease stain. "Try me," she dared. Lily had come down to join her. Daphne walked closer to James, eyes boring into his, fierce

determination etched in her expression. James didn't budge. He grinned wider. "Like what you see, O'Connor? Hurry up, Evans, you might miss your chance."

The sound of Daphne's open hand striking James's cheek echoed loudly around the Entrance Hall. The Gryffindor Quidditch Captain stumbled backward from the force of the blow, caught by Sirius and Remus. He glared angrily at her. "What the bloody hell was that for? It was a bloody joke!"

"One in decidedly poor taste," Lily said, a satisfied smirk on her face. A red handprint was clearly visible on James's face. "Try to get a date to Hogsmeade with that, you arrogant louse."

Daphne laughed despite herself. Lily had a fearsome temper and a sharp tongue. Then, she realized that Peter Pettigrew had disappeared. And unless she had somehow missed him slipping out the front door or walking through his friends, he'd gone down the stairs into the dungeons. She quickly left the Entrance Hall, hoping that Pettigrew hadn't gone so far that she couldn't follow him; the distance a person could travel from the person whose memories were being viewed was seriously limited. She was in luck, as she found Pettigrew sitting just beyond the stairs, his knees pulled up to his chest, his eyes red-rimmed and shining with tears. In front of him lay the parchment that had been crumpled in his right hand. It looked as if it had been smashed into a ball and then flattened out, possibly more than once. Daphne slowly walked around, an unseen and unheard phantom, and looked down to read the writing on the letter. It was short, to-the-point, and offered a perfect explanation for Peter's behavior.

Darling Peter,

Your father passed on last night. I guess I should have seen this coming; his body was too badly broken for even the Healers at St. Mungo's to fix, even if we could have afforded it and they would have agreed to treat him. He died in the hospital; I was with him until the end. I'm sure this will come as a shock to you, and I'm also sure that if you asked Professor McGonagall, she'll let you come home so that we can be together.

I'm so sorry, Peter. I know that he meant as much to you as he did to me.

Mother

So that was what was special about this day; it was the day that Peter learned that his father had died...but why was that important to his changing of loyalties. How did Peter blame or resent his friend for this specific event? She watched Peter try to fight his tears, with relative success. She was starting to wonder if this was at all important when she heard a chillingly familiar voice call out from the shadows. "Pettigrew, are you alright?" The pudgy Gryffindor glanced up, surprised.

Out into the dim light provided by the torches that lined the dungeon walls stepped a fifteen-year old Evan Rosier, his short black hair combed back, his blue eyes, which even then, appeared merciless and cold, scrutinizing the sight before him. "Pettigrew?" he repeated, with concern in his voice. Concern that Daphne knew could not possibly be genuine, but was so convincing that Peter believed it was.

"Yes...yes, I'm fine," he said, getting to his feet.

"You sure?" the future member of Voldemort's inner circle asked. "You don't look it. You get some bad news from home?" he asked, indicating the letter at Peter's feet.

Peter first tried to hide the letter and pretend he didn't know what Evan was talking about, but he gave up. "My dad died," he said quietly. "Killed in a bloody car accident."

"He was a Muggle?" Evan asked, his disdain hidden well by his curiosity. The man was a master of manipulation even at this age. He'd been valuable to the Dark Lord not merely as a duelist, but as a recruiter. It was said he could convince children of prominent Light families that it was in their best interests to join Voldemort's cause, and there were many instances in which he had done exactly that.

"What's it to you?" Peter demanded in a harsh voice. "Care to mock me for being a half-blood?"

"Not at all," Evan said. "I'm sure that he was a good man, and he'll be missed. I lost an uncle not so long ago. I understand what it means to lose someone close to you." Daphne would bet half her fortune that Evan's uncle had been killed in an early Death Eater raid. But Peter didn't know that. "The pain doesn't go away, I assure you, but eventually, you move on. I'm sure that's what he would have wanted. He must have been proud to have had a wizard as a son."

"Yeah, he was proud of me," Peter said, his voice distant. He seemed awkward and skittish, and obviously didn't want to talk to anyone at the moment.

"Surely your friends will help you get through this," Evan consoled him.

"Fat chance. I told them, and they didn't seem to care," Peter said bitterly.

And at that moment, Daphne Dressler knew that she had found the origin of Peter Pettigrew's betrayal. She had found the person responsible. James and Sirius had merely been as insensitive as they had always been at that age. But Peter, who had never before shown anything but adoration for the other Marauders, had had his doubts spoken aloud by one man. The same man whose murder of her husband had sent her into a violent rage thirteen years ago.

Evan Rosier.

A/N: Well, I just got back from a vacation, so this took a while to get through. The other reason was that it was a transitional chapter, and thus, not that wonderful to write.

This chapter was basically intended to set up a number of things for the rest of the year. The implications of the conversation on the brooms between Harry and Ginny should be fairly obvious. Harry's rivalry with Draco is going to be a major change that I'm making to change the plot a bit. I don't like re-writing JKR's work, even from my Harry's perspective.

I love it when people assume that a character they know absolutely nothing about is a Mary Sue. It's probably because I made her an exchange student. Giselle Reisor has quite an interesting past and identity, but her importance won't become apparent until book six. Until then, she'll pop in and out, and remain a frustrating enigma for Harry for the next few years.

The little segment with Daphne at the end was intended to display a bit of her humanity, to offset the unbalanced behavior you've seen lately. Again, I bring up Evan Rosier. Remember that name.

Yes, I hate Ron's hair. Their rivalry won't really resolve itself until book five, maybe six, though at this point, Harry isn't really concerned with him.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter 7: The Goblet of Fire

So this was Moody's challenge.

The students had arrived at Defense class full of anticipation, remembering their first class and the warning that Professor Moody had given as it ended. He'd told them that they would be tested: a test that they could not prepare for in any conventional way. Harry hadn't really given it much thought. That had been a mistake.

This is probably not going to end well, for either of us.

Harry watched as Dean Thomas vainly tried to shake the grip of the Imperius Curse, which was currently allowing Moody to have the Gryffindor tap dance around the room, to the laughs of his classmates. Harry wasn't laughing. He'd never liked being controlled. And since he'd been possessed by Riddle, he *loathed* the very idea. This was a disaster waiting to happen. If he couldn't control his mind, he couldn't control his magic. And his magic would not stand idly by and permit him to be controlled by another. It was not a question of *if* it would lash out, but *how* it would. And what would be left of Professor Moody when it did. Harry had two more students to figure out what to do. He eliminated the possibility of begging out; that would embarrass him and cause him to lose what status he had. But sending Moody crashing headlong into a wall was not an attractive option either.

Dean, who proved incapable of defeating the curse, was finally released. Moody scowled at the members of the class who had been laughing. "Now, you laugh. But just wait until you are the one struggling against my control of your mind and body. This is not a laughing matter. I hope by the end of this class, you will all understand that," he growled.

Next up was Neville Longbottom. Harry tried not to wince as the slightly-rotund boy performed feats of gymnastics that he almost certainly would not have been capable of under normal circumstances. Like the others, he was unable to shake the curse until Moody mercifully released him. Neville turned red and stumbled away to hide in a corner, embarrassed by his failure.

“Your turn, Potter,” the scarred man growled. “You ready for this?”

Harry’s eyes burned with defiance, “Just try me.”

Moody smiled. “That’s the spirit. Let’s see if you can back up your words. *Imperio!*”

A warm, floating sensation overwhelmed Harry’s senses, clouding his mind and dulling his thoughts. He felt his legs moving towards the desks. In his head, he heard Moody’s voice ordering “*Jump on the desk. C’mon, you know you want to. Just jump on the desk.*”

Part of his mind wanted to comply, but the rest of him screamed in protest, memories of Riddle’s possession flashing through his mind. The image of Hermione crumpling as she was hit in the forehead by a Mind Death Curse was all that it took. He opened his mouth in a roar of primal fury, and his magic rushed through his body. Moody’s control buckled, and then shattered. His thoughts returned, but they were consumed by the desire to strike back. He raised his right hand, his wand still in its holster. A blast of white energy emerged from it, singeing the cuffs of his robes and momentarily creating a fierce and painful burning sensation on his palm.

Moody didn’t have time to move before he was hurled backwards with tremendous force, flung like a feather in gale-force winds. He slammed into the wall, but the instant before he did so, a blue sheen emerged from the wall behind him, creating a cushion of air that absorbed most of the blow. It was a good thing, Harry thought, as the Professor slid down the wall, coming to rest on the floor, panting. Had he not, by instinct alone, used that piece of wandless magic, the collision would have been fatal. Instead, he merely looked dazed. The air around him flickered strangely, and for a brief instant, in Moody’s place, Harry saw a strangely familiar blonde man. Less than half a second later, his vision returned to normal, and before him was his scarred, crippled and exhausted DADA professor. Harry staggered, his entire body shaking uncontrollably. His muscles ached and felt fatigued, as if he had just completed one of his morning runs double-time.

Around him, every single student in the class was frozen, some staring at him, the rest at Moody. The look on Hermione’s face was a

cross between awe and horror. Harry backed away, crossing his arms over his chest. His mind was racing, desperately trying to think of something to say. He fought the urge to run.

Moody got to his feet with a grimace, waving off assistance from Dean and Seamus. He quickly pulled his flask from his hip, took a long pull, and screwed the cap back on, replacing it on his belt. Then he smiled. "Must admit, Potter, I wasn't expecting *that* fireworks display. Twenty points to Slytherin."

Twenty points. I almost killed my professor, and instead I get twenty points for my house.

"I suppose the blame must go to me for underestimating you," Moody continued. "Let that be a lesson to all of you. Don't judge the power of a wizard by his size or appearance. Looks can kill."

And with that morbid note, almost on cue, the bell rang. No one moved. "Class dismissed," Moody barked, louder than usual. The entire class jumped as one, then slowly began collecting their things and filing out of the classroom, all the while staring at Harry as if he was one of Hagrid's pets. Hermione just shook her head.

The entire student body of Hogwarts assembled on the shore of the lake, students of all years and Houses mingling freely. Excitement was in the air, anticipation for the long-awaited arrival of the delegations from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. The fact that the champions from each school were to be chosen soon after their arrival, Harry suspected, had something to do with the infectious enthusiasm. Even Filch seemed to be more energetic than usual, attempting the extraordinarily difficult and likely impossible task of cleaning up the entire castle, stones and all. His *energy* had also manifested itself in the form of tantrums and death threats targeted towards students that dirtied the castle...in *any* way. He'd already yelled at Ginny for allowing a quill to fall out of her bag as she walked to her next class.

Harry scanned the crowd around him. Hermione and Ginny stood nearby, though there was no sign of Blaise. Anne Grunitch was also with them, and she was waving over the other 3rd year Slytherin girl

that Harry knew, Melissa Quinn. "How do you think they are going to get here?" Hermione asked, to none of them in particular. "I expect it will be something spectacular, something meant to impress the teachers and Dumbledore."

"That's probably right," Harry commented. "I wonder if there will be dragons involved. I'm sure Hagrid hopes so."

"Don't even mention that," Ginny said. "That's the last thing he needs. He's lucky those mutated beasts haven't killed anyone yet. I realize that he fancies dangerous and rare creatures, but I'm having trouble figuring out why *anyone* would bother taking care of those things. I'm just glad our class doesn't have to get near them. They make the hippogriff look harmless."

Hermione nodded. "I'm usually able to find a way to defend his behavior to all of the other Gryffindors...but I really can't think of a way to do it this time. Skrewts are just foul creatures, and I haven't found anything in my search of the library that mentions the things, let alone what they are useful for."

"I'm starting to wonder if Hagrid decided to try to breed something new. The things remind me of fire crabs, but there's something else. Manticore, maybe?" Harry asked. "Although, I don't know where he would have gotten one of those...let alone how he managed to convince it to breed with a fire crab."

"I'm not sure we *want* to know," Melissa interjected. She frowned. "Potter, are you friends with Lovegood, or something?"

Harry turned to face her. "Sort of...why?"

"Because she's been looking at you for the last five minutes. I'm not sure she's blinked yet," Anne said, looking over at the enigmatic Ravenclaw. "No, she blinked right there. It's still a bit strange though. Why doesn't she just come over here?"

"Because she's Luna," Hermione said, as if that explained everything. In a way, it did.

“Well, maybe I should go to see what she wants,” Harry said. He glanced over at his friends, who shrugged, not objecting. He walked down through the crowd towards Luna, who was rather easy to spot, even excluding the fact that she was still staring at him. She wore her school robes, but with vertical blue stripes that she had obviously added, as well as her butterbeer bottle cap necklace and radish earrings.

As if sensing his glance at her altered robes, Luna said, as soon as he was close enough to hear, “I want to make sure that they know what House I am in. I’m concerned about the students from Durmstrang. They are from Norway, the same place where Fiddling Furants are found in great numbers. Their excrement causes blindness.”

“If they are blind, how will they see the stripes?” Harry asked, wondering why he was encouraging her.

“These aren’t ordinary stripes. They are visible even to a blind person. They can’t see with their eyes, obviously, but they can still see pictures in their heads. And they’ll see me. I can make some green ones, if you want. They’ll match your eyes quite well. I daresay you’ll look quite dashing.”

Baffled by the conversation, Harry didn’t respond for a moment. He briefly glanced around to see if anyone was listening or looking at him, but it was as if they couldn’t see him. Harry wondered if Luna had done something. “Thank you for that, Luna,” he said, a bit awkwardly. “Was there something else you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Why do you have the impression that I want to speak with you about something? I don’t mean to imply that I don’t *want* to talk to you; you are very good company. But why do you think that there is something pressing that I want to tell or ask you?” Luna queried, cocking her head slightly.

Again, Harry was caught a bit off guard. “Well, you were staring at me.”

Luna shrugged. "So? I can stare at you if I want to. It doesn't mean that I need to speak with you. Perhaps you are becoming a bit egotistical, Mr. Potter?"

Harry sighed. "You're approximately the tenth person to tell me that lately."

"Then perhaps you should listen?" Luna suggested. "I'm not saying that you *are* egotistical; I don't really care about that. Better to think the world of yourself than believe that you are entirely useless; especially for a person as important as you. But you still haven't answered my original question."

"I have," Harry protested. "I said that you were staring at me. I suppose that most people would come up to me if they wanted speak with me, but you are...different, and I guess I assumed that you staring at me was supposed to send some kind of message. Maybe I shouldn't have assumed that, either." Harry sighed. "I apologize for that."

Luna raised an eyebrow. "Apologize for what? For assuming that you could predict my behavior. I assure you, Harry Potter, that you are not the only one guilty of that sin. Most of my classmates assume that I am unbalanced, and in this case, they assume that I am a harmless weirdo who collects butterbeer caps to add to her necklace."

"You *do* do that," Harry reminded her.

"Yes, that's true," Luna admitted. "But my point is that it works to my advantage. If I truly cared about gossip, I would be quite a valued source of private information. I hear many things about the juvenile romances occurring among the students. It has always fascinated me that so many people say the words, 'I love you' or 'I love so-and-so' and are completely wrong."

"I guess that's something that comes with experience," Harry said.

"Hardly," Luna scoffed. "Most adults don't understand, either. I know for a fact that I have never been in love with another person, and that besides my father, I have never loved another human being. I don't

remember my mother, though I suppose I must have loved her too, while she was alive.”

“I’m sure you did.”

“And you love your guardian?”

“Of course,” Harry said, now completely confused. Was Luna simply making conversation for her own amusement, or was she trying to convey a message? It was impossible to tell. Her blue eyes radiated curiosity, but her body language betrayed nothing but contentment. That told Harry nothing useful; he’s never seen Luna look anything but content. “Daphne is the only mother that I have any memories of. She raised me and took care of me. She cares deeply about me.”

“*That* is a fact,” Luna said. “Would you say that people tend to be unable to think objectively about those they love, that they ignore or minimize their faults or mistakes and focus on the good things that they do, at least until they can delude themselves no longer.”

Suddenly suspicious, Harry said, “Yes, I suppose that’s true.”

“Of course it is,” she said. “My father is not a particularly successful man. He is the editor of *The Quibbler*, which does not have a very wide readership. He tries to invent things in his spare time, but has yet to create something revolutionary, or even useful. Yet I think the world of him, and see him as an honest, hard-working man who has conviction in his own beliefs.”

Harry realized that this was one of the few indications he’d had that Luna didn’t really believe all of the things that her father wrote about in his newspaper. At least that was what he thought she was implying. “Alright.”

Luna blinked. “Well, how do you look at Daphne? Others see her as a vigilante, a disturbed woman who has taken justice into her own hands and is slowly slipping away from the Light. And because she is a woman who could never embrace the Darkness, they believe that she will eventually destroy herself. What do you think?”

Harry didn't know how to respond. *What do I think of Daphne?* he asked himself. *Am I blinded by the affection that I feel for her?*

"Surely you can answer that question, Harry Potter." It was not a question, but a statement. She smiled grimly. "You know exactly what you think of her, and you are uncomfortable with that. You doubt both your own idealistic vision of her as a powerful woman with a tragic past who sworn absolute loyalty to you and shown you compassion and love, and my description of what an outsider might think."

"Who thinks that?" Harry demanded. "Maybe it's based in some truth, but no one who knows her that well could possibly believe that. She's...a bit disturbed, I won't deny that."

"She tortured you in the Chamber," Luna reminded her. "If she was mentally whole, and she loves you as much as you say she does, why would she have done that?"

Harry felt a flash of anger. "This conversation is over," he growled. "I won't talk about this any more. Daphne has done more for me than any other human being in the world, and I will not forget that because she has made mistakes."

Luna seemed disappointed. "I see. That's unfortunate. Oh, hello, Draco Malfoy. How are you doing on this fine day?"

Harry spun around to see the blonde-haired Slytherin standing behind him, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle. He sneered maliciously. "Talking to the crazies now, are you, Potter? You're really that desperate for support? You know, my father might be willing to talk if you'd just return those books with an apology."

"*Returning* implies that your father actually owns them," Harry said. "That is most certainly not the case. And I believe that I'll decline that invitation, Draco. I wouldn't wish to give Lucius another chance to avenge his master."

"You keep talking like that, and it won't be my father you'll have to worry about!" Draco said angrily.

Harry raised an amused eyebrow. “*You?* Surely you’re joking. You expect me to be frightened of *you?*”

“Perhaps you should be, Potter,” Malfoy sneered. “Your friends may pay the price for your stubbornness.”

“Touch them, and I will make you wish you had never been born,” Harry hissed, loathing blazing behind his darkened green eyes. “I’m warning you, Malfoy, you don’t want to cross me.”

Malfoy seemed a bit taken aback by the rage in Harry’s voice, but recovered quickly. “We’ll see about that,” he said. “C’mon,” he said to his bodyguards. Harry followed his back as he walked away, his gaze attempting to burn a hole straight through the pureblood heir’s torso.

“What was *that* about?” Hermione asked. Harry turned, surprised to see that she was standing beside him. Ginny and her friends were walking toward them.

“Nothing important,” Harry lied. “Malfoy was just being an arse.”

“Where have you *been?*” Ginny demanded. “We looked everywhere, but couldn’t find you or Luna!”

“I’ve been standing right here the entire time,” Harry protested. “Luna and I had one of our cryptic conversations. Then Malfoy showed up. We had words, I threatened him, and he left.”

Hermione sighed. “Am I really sensing the beginning of a minor power struggle, here? Is this really necessary?”

“You know that it is,” Harry told her. “The purebloods are the key. If I can’t parlay with the adults, I’ll talk to their children. Malfoy is in my way. Even if none of the Slytherins think much of him, his father’s influence gives Draco prestige. If I change that, then some of them might listen to me.”

“*Some* of them? *Might?*” Ginny said. “Why not just let Malfoy go on being a pompous jerk. You know that when he’s asked to prove himself, he’ll fail anyway. Why antagonize him and risk getting hurt at all.”

Harry closed his eyes. "We'll talk about his later. Something's happening." He wasn't lying; he'd detected something that felt like magical tremors. He glanced up towards the sky, and was astounded to see what appeared to be a small house soaring high in the sky. A closer look showed that it was not a house, but a carriage, pulled by... *Oh boy*, Harry thought, *it isn't dragons, but it's close enough. Pegasus. Six of them. Hagrid will be absolutely thrilled.*

"Are those..?"

"Yes," Harry confirmed. "That is a giant carriage being pulled by six Pegas...i?" Harry asked, unsure of the proper nomenclature. "Big, winged horses. Very, very, rare. Almost never seen outside of Greece. I wish Tanner was here," he said, thinking of his creature-loving friend from Claw's Clan.

The students were understandably excited at the sight of the carriage and the horses pulling it. Harry figured that it was from Beauxbatons. It wasn't...dark enough for Durmstrang. The school had a bad reputation among Light families, and for good reason. It had been a Death Eater factory during the First War, providing the majority of Voldemort's wizards. They had also been proven to be inferior to the Hogwarts-schooled Death Eaters. None of the Durmstrang graduates, save for one, had been even close to Voldemort's inner circle. And that one man, Igor Karkaroff, had not only sung like a canary when threatened with incarceration in Azkaban, but was now the *Headmaster* of Durmstrang. It was yet another example of the rampant corruption that infested Fudge's ministry. The man should have never seen daylight again, and yet he was now tasked with the instruction of impressionable young students.

Harry watched as the massive Beauxbatons carriage landed on the shore of the lake, many students staring in awe at the magnificent Pegasus horses as they lifted their hooves and stretched their necks. The door on the side of the carriage opened and a ramp extended downward to the ground. First out of the vehicle was an enormous woman, possibly as large as Hagrid. She walked with an arrogance and pride born of position and prestige, real or imagined, Harry didn't know. Dumbledore smiled warmly as she approached. Following her were about two dozen young women and maybe ten boys, all

dressed in neat light blue robes. A number of the girls were quite attractive, even from this distance, but one of them stood out. A radiant beauty with clear, almost transparent blue eyes and long, silvery-blond hair. But something was...off, about her. A second later, he had it. "She's a Veela," Harry whispered. "Or, at least, she's related to one."

Hermione scrutinized the girl he was talking about, and shrugged. "She's quite pretty, but I wouldn't be able to tell if she wasn't human because girls aren't affected by Veela. I wasn't aware that they interbred with wizards."

"Unless I'm very much mistaken, we now know that they do." He frowned, trying to remember something. "Beauxbatons is in France...is there an unusual ratio of boys to girls or something? Why are there so many more girls?"

Hermione shrugged. "I really don't know. Beauxbatons students are known for their knowledge of magic, their refined manners, and, according to some sources, their attractive students. I must admit, several of those boys are quite cute." Suddenly interested, Ginny peered closer at the male members of the Beauxbatons delegation.

"And just as the case with you before, I wouldn't know," Harry said. "Be interesting to get to know a few of them, see what they've been taught. I read that magical education tends to vary wildly from school to school."

"It does," Hermione confirmed. Ginny was still peering in at the Beauxbatons boys. Harry felt a slight twinge of resentment, but quickly suppressed it. Anne and Melissa joined their friend in her ogling, and were soon engaged in a conversation revolving around what they thought of each boy.

"I wonder where Durmstrang is," Harry said to no one in particular. To Hermione, he asked, "Did Dumbledore mention who that giant woman is?"

"Madame Maxime, Headmistress," Hermione replied. "She *is* rather large, isn't she? I wonder if she has Giant blood in her, like Hagrid."

“Don’t say that too loudly,” Harry cautioned. “If that gets out, it could cause major problems. Unfair as it may be, Giants are viewed as bloodthirsty, barbarous monsters, and those related to them aren’t looked upon much more favorably.” Hermione simply nodded.

“Something’s happening with the lake,” Harry heard Neville Longbottom say. He stared, and sure enough, the water began to foam and ripple, almost as if it was boiling. Steam rose from the surface, but Dumbledore didn’t seem alarmed. Then again, Dumbledore *rarely* seemed alarmed by anything. A wooden mast, complete with drenched sails pierced the surface of the lake like a spear, followed by the remainder of a large wooden vessel, water washing over the deck and flowing over the side into the water. The huge ship sailed toward the shore, gently nudging the shallows before dropping a massive anchor which crashed into the water with a splash. Over the sides, several dozen black-clad young men scaled down the side of the hull on robes, before beginning to wade towards shore. Leading them was a tall man with long black hair that was starting to grey, and a neatly trimmed black goatee. His icy dark eyes scrutinized the assembled students, as if searching for threats. His eyes met Harry’s for a split second, and his expression did not warm when he finally caught sight of Dumbledore.

“Well, they certainly know how to make an impression,” Ginny commented. “I’ve never seen anything like that. A magical sailing ship that travels underwater.”

Harry shrugged. He was looking at the assembling Durmstrang students. All were male, dressed in fur coats with black clothing underneath, and most had buzz cuts. They resembled military service recruits more than students. Krum, curiously, was not among them. He listened intently to the loud conversation that Dumbledore and Karkaroff were having. “...yes, Dumbledore, the journey went well. Though a few of my students became a bit seasick, including Viktor. He will join us once he feels up to it. Now, I expect that we will not be kept standing her for any longer than necessary?”

“Of course,” Dumbledore assured him. “Students, Professors, and Staff! Please return to the Great Hall so that we may give our distinguished guests a proper welcome.”

The student did as they were asked, moving as a large mob back towards the castle. The Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students stayed together, and the faculty and staff stayed in back, making sure that all of the students stayed with the main group. The sun was setting to the west, and Harry was already hungry, having eaten only a light lunch. He was also still deep in thought about the confusing conversation he'd had with Luna. He was simply unable to understand his true feelings about Daphne, his doubts balanced equally with his admiration and affection for the woman.

Unsurprisingly, when they arrived in the Great Hall, the Durmstrang students decided to join the Slytherin table. Harry wasn't particularly interested in speaking with them, not until he knew more about them. But several of his Housemates pointed him out to the new arrivals, and approximately half of them were gawping at him. His fame was not constrained by borders, natural or national. It was awkward and uncomfortable, to say the least. Fortunately, Viktor Krum slowly walked in several minutes later, and the attention of his classmates was temporarily diverted. There was one positive thing about all of the attention he was getting; it was visibly irritating Draco. He gave the boy a fake grin, which seemed to anger him more. "Stop it," Ginny whispered harshly in his ear. "Not now."

Realizing that she was right, Harry decided not to even look at Malfoy for the rest of dinner. He tried to listen in to a number of conversations going on around him, but it was difficult in part because most of the Durmstrang students had thick Germanic accents and didn't have a superb command of English. He glanced over, and noticed that the Beauxbatons students had sat down at the Ravenclaw table. He glanced over at the suspected Veela again, this time meeting her eyes. She gazed back curiously. Harry felt the expected pull of attraction, but it was not nearly as strong as that of the Veela he'd seen at the World Cup. He also didn't sense the unusual magical aura that had accompanied the real thing. Clearly, while she might have been related to a Veela, this girl was human.

He broke the eye contact, and turned back to Ginny. "Checking out some of our visitor?" she asked, an amused twinkle in her warm brown eyes.

"She's not a Veela," Harry whispered quietly. "She might be related to one, but she isn't one."

Ginny nodded. At that moment, the food appeared in the center of the tables, and Harry began filling his plate. He noticed some kind of soup that he didn't recognize, and tried it out of curiosity. It had some kind of fish base, he thought.

After they had finished their desserts, with everyone in the Hall thoroughly stuffed, Dumbledore rose. The Hogwarts students fell silent immediately, though it took the visitors a few seconds more before the room was entirely silent. "Welcome, all, to Hogwarts. I know that your journeys here were quite exhausting, and I will attempt to make this as short as possible."

Once he was certain he had the attention of the entire Hall, he continued, "All of you know a fair amount about the Triwizard Tournament. The three of us," he said, indicating himself, Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime, "have told you about its rich and exciting history, the amount of danger present and the skills a champion will need to possess. Now, it is time to choose those champions."

He turned to the Caretaker. Filch stood at attention, wearing a moth-balled orange and brown suit that looked like it hadn't been worn for a few centuries. Mrs. Norris sat faithfully at his feet, her golden eyes flashing red every few seconds. Harry wasn't sure if it was a genetic quirk or if the Kneazle-mix really was evil. "Mr. Filch, please bring the chest," Dumbledore said.

The caretaker dashed down the aisle, and there was an awkward silence as they waited for him to return. Finally, he did so, bearing a large, jewel-encrusted wooden chest that looked older than Dumbledore. Harry detected an unusual powerful aura coming from it...not from *it*, but from something *inside* it. He stared curiously.

Filch brought the chest up to the Head Table and gently set it down. Mrs. Norris jumped onto his shoulder like an overgrown parrot. Filch could probably pass for a pirate if he added an eye patch and Moody's wooden leg. Then drawing out a large key, he put it into the hole and turned it. There was a click of a lock being undone, and the chest creaked open. Filch opened it all the way. The students leaned

forward, trying to get a glimpse at what was inside. Dumbledore stepped forward and reached down. With both hands, he pulled out what appeared to be an ornate oversized goblet of some kind, decorated with blood red rubies reflecting the thousands of candles which illuminated the Great Hall. The cup was probably a meter tall, and wide enough so that the entire volume of the large chest had been needed to contain it.

Suddenly, a blue flame erupted from the goblet, showering yellow sparks. "The Goblet of Fire," Dumbledore announced. "This will be the impartial judge that will determine the champions. All eligible candidates may write their name and school on a slip of paper and drop it into the Goblet. Tomorrow night, during the Halloween Feast, the champion of each school will be chosen." He allowed himself a bemused smile. "To those not old enough that are still considering entering, I warn you that I have taken...precautions to insure the readiness of all champions."

...as if that was going to stop Fred and George. As good as they were, Harry wasn't sure they could outwit Dumbledore. The man had a century of experience on them, at the very least. "Do you think they'll do it?" he asked Ginny.

She frowned. "What?"

Harry blinked. "Do you think that Fred and George will try to enter? And do you think they'll beat Dumbledore's traps?"

Ginny grinned. "I don't think it's a matter of *if* they decide to enter, merely *when*. I heard rumors that they were preparing an Aging Potion. I don't know if it will work, but with Dumbledore's sense of humor, I'm looking forward to seeing the results."

Harry grinned at the thought also. What ever Dumbledore had created, the consequences of failure were not likely to be dangerous, merely humiliating and a source of amusement to anyone watching.

Once the students from all three schools had settled down a bit, Dumbledore sent them all off to bed. It sounded as if the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students would be staying in their carriage and ship, respectively.

Harry spared a glance at Karkaroff, eyeing him as one would a potentially dangerous animal. He would have to be cautious. One thing he had absolutely no faith in was idea that Death Eaters could be redeemed. And that *included* Snape. Merely...*redirected*.

As he moved toward the crowd filing out of the Great Hall, Ginny beside him, he felt a strange tap on his mind. Alarmed, and with the image of Karkaroff still fresh in his mind, he fought it. It withdrew, but with a gentleness that reassured Harry. He slowed slightly, reaching out with his own fledging Legilimency. He couldn't break through any walls at this point, but he could at least touch the minds of others. It took effort, though. It was something he had not been taught, something that he had somehow acquired along with Riddle's magic.

Dumbledore's soft, gentle voice spoke in his mind. *If you wouldn't mind, might we have a short chat tonight, Harry? I believe that we have a great deal to discuss.*

Harry attempted to send a mental image of him nodding in agreement, and felt Dumbledore's contentment, even relief.

Harry made the trek into Dumbledore's inner sanctum with considerably less trepidation than he had expected. Perhaps it was the fact that both participants were going to be approaching this as a casual conversation, albeit with Harry deferring to the experience and wisdom of his elder...by many, *many* years. He gave the stone guardian the password in a level, even voice and was admitted. He strode through the open doors into Dumbledore's office. It didn't seem much different from the last time he'd seen it; the room was filled with bookcases and cabinets displaying thousands of books and hundreds of trinkets and magical objects. His large desk was equally cluttered.

Dumbledore's wizened face broke into a genuine smile as he approached. "Thank you for coming, Harry. Please, take a seat." With a wave of his hand, he yanked a wooden chair away from where it rested on a wall and brought it to rest a few feet from the front of the desk. Harry sat down. Dumbledore didn't wait long before he began. "I must say, Harry, that I am pleased with the progress you have

made. You have matured physically, mentally, emotionally and magically. That said, as I'm sure you have heard, you still have a ways to go. But it is a start, Harry, and that in and of itself is an accomplishment."

Harry wasn't sure how to form a graceful response to that. He settled on a simple, "Thank you."

Dumbledore nodded. "Daphne told me of your dreams this summer. Have you experienced any since arriving at Hogwarts?" He seemed extremely curious, though Harry was certain he was only hiding his concern for Harry's benefit.

Harry shook his head. "I'm not sure if my Occlumency has improved or he's stopped trying. I must say I'm grateful, regardless."

"As am I, Harry. As am I..."

Harry frowned. "Were you able to make anything out of Daphne's description? Anything that seems familiar?"

Dumbledore shook his head slowly. "Unfortunately, even if I made an educated guess I would likely be wrong. I know Tom well, Harry. He is more than simply a magical genius. He is a cunning tactician and planner. He specializes at deceit, and is adept at picking the people capable of carrying out his plans."

Harry considered that. "Sir, I assume you heard about what happened with Professor Moody."

"I did. The idea to give you personal experience with the Curse was Professor Moody's idea. He fought for it, and I agreed, albeit with reservations. I would rather than none as young as you be exposed to such horrific uses of magic. But I could not argue with his logic. If you are to fight the Dark, it is best that you understand what you are up against. As for your...reaction, it was remarkable, if unsurprising. You are tremendously powerful, Harry, and you fiercely resist being controlled. I imagine that your classmates weren't prepared for something like that."

Harry shrugged. "I've been the center of worse rumors. Being abnormally powerful isn't something that typically drives people away. Far from it."

"Indeed," Dumbledore said. He took a long drink of his tea, his eyes fixed on Harry, as if waiting for him to say something.

Then, something occurred to him. "Sir, is there anything you could tell me about that Reisor girl? She seems a bit...odd to me," Harry said, unable to come up with a better way to describe the unusual aura.

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed. "Yes, so then you have sensed something strange as well. To be perfectly honest, Harry, I don't know much more than you do. She is from France, but her father is not easy to locate. It's just the two of them, and she was home schooled. She told Minerva that her father decided that she needed some social interaction with children of her own age."

"Pardon me saying so, sir, but it seems as if she would be most at home with people quite a bit older than her. She's...adept, you know, as far as purebloods go. Not the best I've seen," he admitted. "But she's a puzzle, and I think she counts on that to distract people. I've certainly been a victim."

"Miss Greengrass is the other that you speak of, I presume. Or perhaps Mister Nott? I trust you not to repeat this, but I've always been unnerved by this sort of adult behavior at such a young age. I've always felt that while maturity is something to be prized in children and young adults, it is not something to be achieved. A childhood is a wonderful thing, Harry, and the longer that a young person has to experience it, so much the better. I'm afraid that you did not have that luxury, though by no fault of your own." He adjusted his glasses, a sign of anxiety and stress that seemed a bit out of place to Harry. "But when a parent *chooses* to end their son or daughter's childhood prematurely, I feel that it is one of the greatest of tragedies. Our childhood memories, our feelings and emotions that are born out of innocence and naivety never truly leave us. And they can be a powerful guard against malevolent behavior. I've often found that children whose childhood was robbed from them tend to be at a higher risk for losing their compassion and kindness."

Harry listened, fascinated by the concept. It occurred to him that he was among those whose childhood's had been cut short, but he was able to put that out of his mind. If Dumbledore was indeed correct, it explained a lot. He smiled. "Is that why you eat sweets all of the time? And offer them to others?"

Smiling back, Dumbledore nodded. "In my youth, I had quite an appetite for sweets of all kinds. In the course of two long and painful wars, I felt as though I had forever lost that innocence. I have made a vow to myself, Harry, that I will never forget what it is like to be a child, to be free and unburdened by the troubles of the real world. As they say, 'Ignorance is bliss.' Perhaps I also sought to defy the conventional wisdom that says you cannot regain your innocence once it is lost. But whether I have truly regained it or have deluded myself into believing that I have is ultimately irrelevant. If you take nothing else away from all that I have told you, Harry, remember this: be mindful of your power and the responsibility that goes with it. And never allow your innocence to be completely stripped from you. It can sustain you when all else fails."

They talked for at least another hour, with Harry describing the progress he'd made over the summer, and Dumbledore suggested some exercises that might allow him to continue to develop his talents. It was, easily, the most relaxed and soothing conversation that he'd ever had with the venerable Headmaster. There was no tension between them, merely a mutual understanding that comes from possessing something that cannot be described. Destiny, power and responsibility were merely words. The true sense and essence of what they shared could not be articulated by mere words. Harry allowed his guard to drop, his cynicism and suspicion to fade away. Though he was the student, and Dumbledore the master, they spoke as equals. And when Dumbledore finally suggested that they both get to bed, Harry left with a feeling of purpose and contentment that he hadn't enjoyed for ages.

The fact that the Champions were to be announced at the conclusion of the Halloween Feast meant that the student were even more excited than they usually were. The Hogwarts Staff, predominantly Dumbledore and McGonagall, had gone all-out in decorating the

Great Hall. Maybe a hundred jack o' lanterns, about as many skeletons, and dozens of fake bats obstructed the night sky displayed across the enchanted ceiling. The food, as usual, was excellent, and Hermione managed to avoid making a comment about how it was prepared by slave labor. The Durmstrang students had ravenous appetites, and Harry wondered exactly what they subsisted on back at their school. The Beauxbatons students were obviously used to something else entirely, and most of them picked at their food.

Harry hadn't talked much with Krum or any of the other Durmstrang students, they tended to keep to themselves and spent most of their days attending classes on their ship. Harry thought it would have been interesting to incorporate the foreign students into their classes, but Madam Maxime and Karkaroff had probably vetoed it. Speaking of the man, Harry had been keeping a loose eye on him, as per Daphne's advice, and had noticed that he tended to poke his nose where it wasn't welcome. Harry had spotted him exiting the forest three times, saw him wandering around the dungeons once (considering the icy relationship between the two former Death Eaters, he probably wasn't paying a social call), and most bizarre of all, standing in the middle of the empty Great Hall. Harry had gone back to retrieve his Transfiguration textbook and found him standing there. He'd definitely been surprised to be disturbed, and had looked alarmed when he saw exactly who it was who had entered. Harry had briefly locked eyes with him before getting his book and leaving.

Karkaroff sat near Snape, and maybe Weasley might have interpreted that to mean that they were friends, but to anyone who had the slightest understanding of body language, it was clear that that wasn't the case. Snape was upright and stiff, deliberately avoiding Karkaroff's eyes and speaking only in clipped, irritated tones. Karkaroff's eyes were doing a decent impression of Mad-Eye Moody, scanning the room every few seconds, as if looking for threats. He was definitely worried about *something*.

"He really is *obvious*, isn't he?" a voice, laced with disdain, came from the side.

Harry didn't need to turn around to know who it was, although he was a bit surprised nonetheless. He and Theodore Nott had said scarcely

a word to one another this year. Maybe it was the cruel streak that Nott showed on occasion, or his seeming disinterest in Harry's burgeoning power, but Harry had forgotten he was there on occasion. "You're talking about Karkaroff."

"Of course I am," Nott replied, sounding insulted. "Who else is scurrying around like a frightened rodent, constantly looking over his shoulder? He's hiding from something, or from *someone*."

"Well, there are only a few people who that could be," Harry said. He was being intentionally vague.

"Indeed," Nott said, taking a sip of his pumpkin juice. "Karkaroff is a coward, but his only enemies are the Dark Lord and his servants...*former* servants." Harry wasn't sure if Theodore hadn't intentionally misspoken. There was a Nott in Azkaban, though Harry was fairly certain it wasn't Theodore's father. Nott had kept his background and upbringing shrouded in secrecy, and Daphne's information was older than he was.

Harry was somewhat concerned by what sounded like a hint of longing in Nott's voice. "Most likely," was Harry's reply.

"You'll be the center of this war," Nott whispered. "The battle between the Dark Lord and you will determine the victor. You've certainly got your work cut out for you, don't you, Potter?"

Harry was taken aback. Even though when one thought about it, the rivalry between Harry and Voldemort seemed obvious, most still denied it, unwilling to believe that a boy of his age could be the Light's best and probably *only* hope for victory. Even Harry had trouble getting his arms around the concept at times. But here was Nott, who rarely spoke to him, openly admitting that he knew of Harry's destiny. Perhaps it was the fact that he actually *admitted* it that froze him for a moment. He abruptly checked around to see what Ginny was doing, and was relieved to see that she appeared to be deep in conversation with Melissa Quinn and Anne Grunitch, two of her Slytherin classmates. "I suppose I have a long way to go. But I'll get there," he replied softly. "I have to."

Nott nodded, perhaps in approval, perhaps in agreement, perhaps simply out of courtesy, it was impossible to tell. "Greengrass has taken an interest in you, hasn't she?" he asked after a short pause. This was starting to feel like an interrogation, or at the very least a test; Harry didn't intend to fail it. The key was to answer the question without revealing too much information.

"I wouldn't say that's entirely accurate," Harry countered.

"How so?"

Harry was surprised. He would have expected Nott to drop it, not to ask him to clarify. This could be part of the test, or it could be genuine curiosity. Or an attempt to gain information for his father. "The content of our conversations is private, but we aren't really friends. She's speaking to me on the behalf of another."

"Her father."

Harry supposed he shouldn't be surprised by *that*, either. Nott was sharp, and Daphne didn't really have anyone else that she would do the bidding of. *Willingly*, at least. He decided that it was safe to nod. Nott considered that.

"Aiden Greengrass is a powerful wizard, a great fighter...if a bit...rash."

That definitely didn't surprise Harry. Aiden carried himself like a typical pureblood Slytherin, but the man had been a Gryffindor for a reason. Harry could imagine that his courage and daring, combined with pureblood training, made him a dangerous enemy. "I haven't experienced that first-hand, so I can't comment."

"Ah, it appears that Dumbledore wants to tell us something." Dumbledore had indeed set down his knife and fork, and was beginning to rise. "Must be announcing the champions. I must admit, I'm quite anxious to find out who will be representing Hogwarts. At least it won't be those buffoons, the Weasley twins."

Indeed it wouldn't be. Predictably, Fred and George had refused to admit defeat, brewing an Aging Potion over the last month and using

it to try to cross the Age Line set up by Dumbledore to prevent underage students from entering the tournament. And predictably, Dumbledore's little trap had won out. The Weasleys had been sent to the hospital wings with minor bruises and, more alarmingly, long, white beards to rival Dumbledore's own. It was a fitting punishment from a man who behaved at times like a 200-year old child.

At this moment, however, Dumbledore was acting the role of kindly guardian of the Hogwarts student body. "Now that we are all watered and fed," he began, silencing all remaining conversation, even from the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang student, "I believe that is time to introduce the judges and choose the Champions." He gestured to his right, to a set of tables that had been positioned just a bit in front of the Slytherin table. Harry blinked repeatedly. It was as if the tables and their occupants had appeared out of thin air. He'd looked in that direction before and seen nothing. Dumbledore had somehow hidden them. Most of the other students seemed to be assuming that they had been there all along and they simply hadn't seen them before. "Representing the Ministry of Magic will be the Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports, Mr. Ludo Bagman. And representing the Auror division will be..."

It *couldn't* be. Harry's eyes went wide at the sight of her, but there was no mistaking those troubled grey-green eyes, that marred visage, that commanding presence. "...Daphne Dressler, specially appointed Auror instructor."

Ginny and Hermione's head spun around so fast Harry was afraid they might get whiplash. He shrugged helplessly. He had no idea that Dumbledore would have been able to pull this off. Considering the differences between Scrimgeour and Daphne regarding her...methods, it was a minor miracle that she was even working for the Aurors, much less representing them. The applause for her was somewhat muted, and Harry guessed that most of the students were transfixed by her brutal facial disfigurements, or knew her back-story well enough to be somewhat stunned by her appearance. "Finally," Dumbledore continued, "the Head of the Department for International Magical Cooperation, Barty Crouch, who was absolutely instrumental in getting this project off the ground." Dumbledore applauded politely. The cold, stiff wizard nodded politely, but his eyes flicked back and

forth between Snape and Karkaroff. *Dumbledore certainly knows how to bring together people that hate one another*, Harry thought, thinking of Lockhart and Lupin. "The remaining three judges will be myself, Madam Maxime, and Headmaster Karkaroff. Now, I believe it is time to move on to the champions themselves. Once named, they will stand and proceed into the next room."

The Great Hall, if it were possible, grew even quieter as Dumbledore approached the Goblet of Fire, blue flames still spewing from the ornately adorned magical relic. He stopped before it, and the flames abruptly flashed crimson. A small piece of paper, smoke trailing behind it, shot out of the Goblet and in the air, where Dumbledore caught it, adjusted his glasses, and said, "The champion from Beauxbatons will be Fleur Delacour." It was the Veela-girl, who rose to her feet gracefully as the Beauxbatons students and quite a few Durmstrang and Hogwarts boys applauded loudly. Following Dumbledore's outstretched arm, she disappeared through a doorway behind the Head Table. Harry distantly realized that a number of Fleur's schoolmates were in tears; they were probably not tears of joy.

Again the flames burned red, and another smoking piece of parchment shot upward. "The champion for Durmstrang will be Viktor Krum." This time, most of the assembled students, boys and girls, applauded as the Quidditch phenom and World Cup goat rose to his feet and, with a slight air of entitlement, followed Fleur Delacour into the unseen chamber. A slight buzz of excitement from the Hogwarts students continued after the applause had died out.

For a third time, the Goblet burned red, and finally, the parchment bearing the name of the Hogwarts Champion settled into Dumbledore's hand. "The Champion for Hogwarts," he began, smiling a little, "will be Cedric Diggory."

The Hufflepuff table exploded as their Quidditch Captain rose to his feet, looking stunned. His house rarely got any of the glory, and were widely (wrongly) perceived as weak and cowardly. Cedric was a fine Seeker, although Harry didn't know him personally. He played by the rules. And his father was well-known and very influential in the Ministry of Magic. That was the fullest extent of what Harry Potter

knew about the Hogwarts Champion, Cedric Diggory. And it was probably *still* more than most everyone else.

Ginny said something that he couldn't understand in all the noise, and he turned to his left to face her. "I'm happy for him," she repeated. "Hufflepuffs don't normally get this kind of recognition." Harry nodded, but he was distracted by something. Rather than remaining blue, the Goblet had flashed crimson once more. *A fourth champion?* Slowly, the Great Hall became aware that something was amiss, though surprisingly, it took Dumbledore the longest to realize that something was happening. A fourth slip of parchment was ejected from the Goblet of Fire, and it nearly hit the ground before Dumbledore snatched it out of the air. Looking puzzled, he read the name. Harry stared into his eyes, the only thing, he knew, that might betray Dumbledore's emotions. He saw surprise, alarm, and then resigned acceptance, all in the space of a few seconds. And his feeling of dread grew.

The Hall was dead silent now, every last student, teacher, and judge waiting for Dumbledore to say what was on the slip of paper. He took a deep breath, and Harry braced himself. "Harry Potter..."

At that instant, dual mental attacks blasted his flimsy shields to fragments with all the finesse of a pair of battering rams. He let his shields disintegrate, and let the enraged mental presences, which he knew without question to be Daphne and Snape, rummage through his mind, searching for a memory that wasn't there: the memory of him sneaking down, disabling Dumbledore's safeguard, charming the Goblet, and placing his own name in. Daphne was the first to pull out, followed quickly by Snape. Unsteady, Harry got to his feet just as Dumbledore repeated his name. Eyes focused directly ahead, blocking out everything around him, including the accusing stares of his friends and family, he strode through the doorway and into the chamber, closing the door just as the Great Hall exploded.

Lifelessly wandering, mind spinning, thoughts a confused and chaotic jumble of emotions and rational observations and deductions, he found himself in the middle of a large room with a fireplace and dozens of framed wizarding portraits, as well as some medals and trophy's that apparently were being stored in her. Dimly, he registered

the presence of the other three champions, who stared confusedly back at him. He walked off to the side and leaned against the cool masonry of the castle walls, trying to collect himself. He knew only a few things for certain at the moment: 1) He didn't enter himself; 2) With maybe a couple of exceptions, the entire school, Ginny and Hermione included, would be convinced that he had; and 3) Daphne and Snape were the only ones who knew for sure that he *hadn't* entered.

He felt the approaching presence of his guardian before she came up beside him. Rather than communicating verbally, she projected into his mind, *"I'm sorry for what I did, but I had to know. Now that I do, I'll do everything I can to figure out how this happened, and what we can do about it. Are you alright?"*

"Fine," Harry sent back, which was really just a matter of *pushing* his thoughts into the mind of another using his magic. It was relatively effortless, although Harry had never tried it on a person using Occlumency."

"Potter?" Cedric's voice asked. "What are you doing here? Do they want us back in the Hall or something?"

He shook his head. "No. You are looking at the fourth champion."

"What?" Fleur demanded her tone angry, her French accent exaggerated by her emotion. "ogwarts is to 'ave *deux* champions?"

Harry shrugged, not sure of what else to do. "And *she* is a *judge*, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"What are you saying?" Daphne asked in a soft, deadly-sounding voice.

"Qu'est-ce que vous pensez?" Fleur asked in her native tongue. *"C'est suspect, n'est-ce pas?"*

Harry understood enough French to figure out what she was saying. She thought, understandably enough, he supposed, that Daphne's presence and his being chosen as the fourth champion were directly related.

Five other figures entered the room, arguing in loud voices. Dumbledore, Karkaroff, Crouch, Bagman, and Madam Maxime. Fleur spotted her headmistress and cried, "*Madame*, 'zey are saying 'zat 'zis boy is to compete also?" The fact that she spoke in heavily accented English rather than her native French probably meant that she wanted the others to hear her complaint.

Maxime rounded on Dumbledore, who was a few centimeters taller, but probably many kilos lighter. "What is ze' meaning of this, Dumbleedorre?" she demanded.

"I assure you, Madame, that I did not know about this, and that I am as puzzled about this as you are," Dumbledore said in a calm voice.

"*Merde!*" she cursed. "'Zit is rather obvious what 'appened, Dumbleedorre," she berated him. "'Ze boy entered himself."

"Impossible."

But the statement came from neither Dumbledore, nor Daphne, nor Harry himself. Snape strode up to the assembled group, his eyes locking with the large French woman's. "I used Legilimancy on him, and detected not the slightest hint of deceit. Even if he had attempted to enter, regardless of his ability or lack thereof, he doesn't know enough magic to confuse the Goblet."

Snape was defending him. It was something that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago, but felt natural now. Daphne was standing behind him, her eyes fierce. She radiated protectiveness.

"Madame, if Potter wanted attention, do you really thinking he'd invent a *fourth school*? Even, assuming that he was skilled enough to fool both Dumbledore's age line and the Goblet itself, *why wouldn't he just trick the Goblet into thinking that he was of age and eligible to be Hogwart's Champion*? Even *Potter's* head is not big enough to create his own school with a student body of one."

Thanks for the vote of confidence, Snape, Harry thought distantly. He kept his face stoic and his expression attentive.

Madame Maxime might have been placated, but she clearly didn't want to *appear* so, and harrumphed as she took Fleur aside, leaving only the enraged Durmstrang Headmaster. "I'm of a mind to take my champion and leave, Dumbledore," he spat. "We were promised an equal chance in this competition, and I would say that you didn't live up to your end of the bargain."

"Empty threat, Igor," Alastor Moody growled, hobbling over to them. "It's a *binding* magical contract. You can't leave, or, at least," he said, gesturing at Krum, standing in the shadows, "you can't take him with you. Convenient, eh?"

Karkaroff stared back at him. "*Convenient?* I'm afraid I will never understand you, Moody." He turned to Dumbledore. "I would have thought you had better sense than to let this *madman* teach children, Dumbledore. This man once blew up a box that he'd received, containing a clock, because he suspected that it was a dragon egg. He sees conspiracies everywhere he looks...except right in front of him of course." He sneered at the ex-Auror.

Daphne's voice was soft and deceptively calm, and surprised the Durmstrang Headmaster. "Perhaps if you weren't so concerned with ancient grudges, you might actually bother to think about what he said. He said that the contract was "convenient" because it means that Harry has to compete regardless of whether he wants to."

"And you are suggesting that the mysterious person that entered him was aware of this, and intends him harm?" he scoffed.

"I think that I'm *looking* at him," she retorted, intense hatred showing in her voice. "*Death Eater*," she spat. Cedric and Fleur's heads spun around, staring in stunned disbelief at the accused.

"*Daphne!*" Dumbledore warned. "Enough! I will not have you two dueling in the middle of this room."

"The coward would flee before she had a chance to inflict any harm," Moody growled. "You brought this upon yourself, Dumbledore. Two known, *reformed* (he said the word in a mocking, cynical tone, as if he didn't believe such a thing was possible) Death Eaters in Hogwarts at the same time. Two that hate each other, mind."

“Severus Snape was never convicted of any crime, and Headmaster Karkaroff was granted a full pardon in return for his cooperation.” Dumbledore said, his tone dangerously calm. “And in this country, that makes them innocent men. Regardless of your pasts, the central issue should concern what to do next.”

“There really isn’t a choice,” Barty Crouch, who hadn’t spoke since he’d arrived, put in, his voice grave and tired. “Potter’s name came out of the Goblet, and regardless of who put it there, he’s required to compete. And Dressler is forbidden from rendering him aid. *Those* are the rules, and they aren’t going to change. As...*irregular* as this is, Hogwarts will have two champions, and Durmstrang and Beauxbatons one each.”

Harry only wished that the situation were as simple and easy to understand as Barty Crouch had just made it sound.

A/N: Again, sorry that this took an eternity to write and edit.

Anyway, to go through this event by event:

Harry's reaction to the Imperius Curse should have been predicatable; he's extremely averse to being controlled since he was possessed by Riddle. I also hope that scene made it clear that it is indeed Barty Crouch Junior using Polyjuice, not Moody himself. That said, his little deception might end differently. Consider that Daphne was Moody's protege, and knows him quite well...

Luna is going to remain an enigma, offering tidbits equally philosophical and non-sensical for the foreseeable future. She's a fun character to play around with, but the truth is that even I don't know what I ultimately want her to become. She's extremely powerful in ways that even she can't grasp, and her worldview is heavily colored by the perception that she is different from everyone else. But because she remains a distant observer, and has the ability to sense emotions and even thoughts simply by being around a person, she can figure out things that others can't. She's also not inhibited by political correctness, and just says what she thinks.

Harry's conversation with Dumbledore was meant to explain a bit more about the philosophy of the wizard himself, offer my own explanation of one of his more famous quirks, and provide reassurances that Harry and Dumbledore are on good terms. I never intended for Dumbledore to be overly manipulative.

Daphne's presence at the Triwizard Tournament was one of the things I agonized over. She's essential to the storyline I've roughly drafted, but it seemed awkward and illogical for her to be there. Eventually, I decided that unless I completely re-worked the plot, I had to have her there. I made her a judge for similiarly plot-based reasons. Will she be partial to Harry? Probably less than you think; after all, she's very socially conscious and holds Harry to very high standards.

I've decided not to draw out the inevitable confrontations between Hermione and Ginny over his allegedly entering the tournament, because I think they've moved past that. Ginny, in case you haven't noticed, is much more apt to trust Harry. There's still a bit of that hero-worship going on there. Another one of the things I've considered is further developing Ginny's character, which is kind of hard to do in the world I've created. Suggestions would be helpful. I'm going to do my best to make the eventual relationship between Harry and Ginny as meaningful as possible, and I do have quite a climactic moment planned, but that's at the end of part seven, and a ways off.

I decided to use a bit of my High School French in the scene with Fleur. It would make sense for her to revert to it when she was agitated.

Harry will get to know the other champions a bit better this time.

The issues between Harry and Hermione are basically going to remain unresolved, and its testament to the strength of their friendship that that can happen. They have serious philosophical differences, and have settled firmly on opposite sides. Ginny doesn't really know where she stands at this point; she worries about Harry's safety, yet she's less apt to criticize Harry every time he puts his neck on the line. And she trusts his judgment more than Hermione does. Ginny is in many ways, as I mentioned before, an undeveloped

character. She hasn't really had a chance to come into her own. That's what I'm struggling with. And Blaise is still alive, but I'm rethinking some of my earlier plans for him.

As an answer for Jane, Evan Rosier and his father share names. I'm actually taking that directly from canon: Rowling mentions an Evan Rosier that Riddle knew at school, and later names him again in a list of Death Eaters that attended school at the same time as Snape and Harry's parents.

Anyway, my creative energies have mostly returned, so you won't have to wait almost two months for the next chapter.

Chapter Eight: Dragon's Teeth

Harry felt dangerously exposed as he leaned forward away from the wall, staring at his guardian. The other three champions had since departed, along with Dumbledore and the other judges, leaving them, mother and son in everything but name and blood, alone together. Daphne's expression was strangely unreadable and she was silent for a long moment. Harry felt the need to speak first. "Technically, I'm not supposed to receive help from you, conflict of interest and all. But I'm neither stupid nor naïve enough to believe that if Karkaroff and Madame Maxime weren't planning to give their students help, illicit or not, they certainly are now. And you never even considered not helping me."

"Correct on all counts," she said, almost as if she was a professor teaching a class. A class on what, though? *Survival?*

"Do you really think Karkaroff entered me?" Harry asked next.

Daphne sighed, running a hand through her hair. "No. He has neither the skills nor the *rock* to do something like this. His only use to the Ministry after he was captured was as an informant, shamelessly ratting out his compatriots to avoid a life-long sentence in Azkaban. He's dangerous, but he's also pathetic. I jumped to conclusions." She paused. "Interesting that Krum already knew."

"I've known that Snape was a Death Eater for several years."

"Point taken. What next?" she asked. "I must admit, I was honored to be chosen to judge. I didn't tell you, but I went to Scrimgeour and managed to convince him that I was of more use instructing his new Aurors than sitting on the sidelines because he doesn't approve of the way I do things. Dumbledore got me to be made a judge, of course. I didn't realize he had that much pull with Crouch or Fudge. I suppose I should be grateful, though."

"I guess," Harry replied. "I have no doubt that you'll be a great help, but this looks *really* bad."

"I know," Daphne agreed. "They were wrong, of course, but the conclusion that that Delacour girl jumped to wasn't exactly a surprise."

It's the obvious conclusion, based on what she knew. And you know that everyone else will come to the same conclusion."

"Which leaves the question: do I deny it, or do I lie about it? One makes me look weak and victimized, and most people won't believe it, and the other makes me seem arrogant and makes Dumbledore look weak and manipulated."

"It isn't an easy question to answer," Daphne admitted. "What I would be more concerned about, however, is your friends' reactions. You were sitting near Ginny, did you see how she reacted?"

Harry shook his head. "I was too stunned by what had happened to look around. I'm guessing she wasn't happy. They don't trust my judgment. They think I'm too determined to prove myself, and end up putting myself in unnecessary danger. They were particularly concerned with incident with Lucius Malfoy over the summer."

Daphne nodded, understanding. "They don't understand all of this, Harry. Perhaps you should be more cautious, but you cannot afford to play it safe at every opportunity. Only by taking risks can you make yourself known. I'm not suggesting throwing caution to the wind, but I have good knowledge that your run-in with Lucius sent some waves through the pureblood camp."

"Probably painting me as a pompous fool," Harry countered.

Daphne sighed. "Possibly. But that you walked away unscathed at the very least makes Lucius look bad. At best...well, it appears to many that you are not intimidated by your future role, and will not be easily manipulated by others...most of all, Dumbledore."

"I suppose the mistrust would be mutual," Harry mused. He was referring to Dumbledore's intense dislike of Dark Purebloods, and his unwillingness to ally with them that had nearly cost him the war. In times of chaos, purebloods flocked to power like moths to a candle. Spurned by Dumbledore, many threw in their lots with Voldemort.

"It is," Daphne assured him. "Dumbledore is respected by all...well, at least those who know anything about his history. He is viewed as soft, a Muggle-lover, and somewhat senile. But his power and conviction is

unquestioned. Unfortunately, his conviction include faith in redemption and rejection of discrimination against Muggles and Muggle-borns. Hence the ideological clash. If Dumbledore was more *politique*, to use a French term, the war might have been far less difficult to wage. There were a number of families so loyal to the Dark Arts and the legacy of Salazar Slytherin that they could not be swayed. But I can think of at least a dozen who would have sided with the Ministry, and thus, with Dumbledore, had he not insisted that they treat their Muggle-born or half-blood colleagues as equals. That was never going to happen, and he knew it."

Harry blew out a breath. "Well, with all of this in mind, what's the plan? How *am* I going to get through this with all of my limbs still firmly attached to my body?"

Daphne shrugged, an unexpectedly unconcerned gesture. "I have little doubt that you are capable of surviving the tasks, Harry. You *will* need help."

Harry frowned at her. "I'd expect you to be more concerned. You've always gone off the deep end when it comes to my life being in danger."

"That was when you had a *choice*, or something could be *done*," she explained. "In this case, neither is true. The contract is binding, and you would do irreparable damage to your reputation if you even tried to back out. I don't mean to make it sound like I value your reputation above your life, because I don't, but given the circumstances, it's as good an argument as any. I *am* worried about you, Harry. But I'm not going to panic when that will accomplish nothing."

Harry considered that. "Well, what *can* you do? Technically, I realize you can't do anything..."

Daphne shook her head, waving it off. "Cheating is as much a part of the Triwizard Tournament as the Goblet of Fire. It always has been. Madame Maxime and Karkaroff want to beat Dumbledore *badly*, probably more so because they think *he* is responsible for entering you into the tournament. Setting aside how badly they have misjudged his character, they will do anything in their power to take the Cup home to their schools. I'd be surprised if they weren't already

planning out a training regimen, as we will do. At this point, none of us knows the Tasks; only Bagman and Crouch do, because they orchestrated the whole thing.”

“What about Cedric?”

“What about him?”

Harry gave her a curious look. Her thoughtlessness surprised him. “He doesn’t have *anyone*...well, besides Professor Sprout, and as badly as I’m sure *she* wants to win glory for Hufflepuff, I don’t see her agreeing to give him private lessons.”

Daphne blinked. “Why are you so concerned with *his* training?”

“Hadn’t we already decided that *surviving* the Tournament was more important than *winning* it?” Harry asked. “Unless I blow away the field, which I don’t *want* to do, the prestige I gain in the eyes of those that matter will be negligible. They already know that I’m abnormally powerful for my age and training. I’ll simply be confirming what they already know, and potentially risking the lives of others in the process.”

“Caring about fairness isn’t exactly *Slytherin*, Harry,” Daphne reminded him.

“I like Cedric,” Harry retorted. “He’s an honest, hard-working, skilled young wizard. I don’t want to see him embarrassed or hurt because he could not find anyone willing to cheat for him. Besides, it would alienate the rest of Hogwarts, not the least of which is the Hufflepuff House...unless you plan to tell me that they don’t matter.”

“I wasn’t,” Daphne replied, a touch of anger in her voice. “It is important to gain their support, and your reasoning is sound, if a bit surprising. But what do you propose that we do about it? I’m not training anyone besides you, and Dumbledore can’t take the risk when he’s already been accused of manipulating the system. And as you said, Spout isn’t going to break the rules for him. So what can we do?”

“At least throw him a bone once in a while,” Harry proposed. “I don’t know what to do. But it doesn’t seem right to me, when I’m not really that interested in *winning* this bloody thing, to leave him in the lurch like that. Do you think his father might organize something?”

Daphne shook her head. “Amos is a wonderful man, and a competent administrator, but he’s not a particularly good wizard. Cedric is his pride and joy, pretty much everything that he wasn’t at the same age; athletic, popular, what have you. But he can’t risk hiring a tutor because it would be too obvious, and I don’t think he can really tell Cedric that much that he doesn’t already know.” She paused. “Harry, it’s late, and I know that you are concerned about him, but just humor me and let it go.”

Harry nodded. “Where are you going to be staying?”

Daphne stopped. “Well, I had been planning to simply shuttle back and forth between Dressler Manor and Hogwarts, but that was before I knew you would be directly involved. I can either find a place to stay in Hogsmeade or ask Dumbledore to find me space.”

“No offense, but I’d rather you found a flat in Hogsmeade,” Harry said. “I can’t be seen as relying on you, and truth be told it would be a bit awkward with you around.”

“I understand,” she replied. “Really, I do. I’ll see what I can find. If worst comes to worst I’ll just Apparate in the mornings to the edge of the wards.” Her expression turned serious. “Harry, be gentle with your friends. Tell them the truth, and give them time to accept it. You haven’t exactly established a track record of safe behavior, so it’s natural for them to believe you entered intentionally. They’re bright girls, and they’ll figure out the truth.”

“I will,” Harry told her. And with that, guardian and ward went their separate ways.

Harry expected the welcome that he got from Ginny Weasley when he returned to a deserted Slytherin Common Room. She stood, in her nightgown, in front of the fire, her back to him as he entered. He didn’t speak, waiting for her to begin. He waited about a minute

before she finally said, in a low, aggravated voice. “I *really* wish that I could believe that you wouldn’t have been so utterly *stupid* and *reckless*. But I’m finding that rather difficult.”

“You’re in luck then,” Harry said in a voice full of mock cheer. “Because I wasn’t that utterly *stupid* or *reckless*. I didn’t enter myself into the Triwizard Tournament.”

Ginny spun around, hair flying in a fiery-red halo. “You *wouldn’t* lie to me about that, right?” she asked, as if she scarcely dared to believe him. “I mean, you *have* lied to me before, right?” When he didn’t reply, she said, in a voice approaching panic, “*Right?*”

“No, I *wouldn’t*,” Harry reassured her. “I didn’t enter. I don’t know why my name came out of the Goblet, but it doesn’t really matter at this point. I have no choice but to compete.”

“You’re joking, right?” Ginny said, sounding horrified. “There is a way you can get out of this? I mean, you aren’t old enough to compete. Surely there’s a loophole somewhere that you can use.”

Harry shook his head. “Binding magical contract. Whoever put my name in knew that I would be selected and knew that I would have to compete.”

“Could it have been Daphne?”

Ginny’s tone was not quite accusatory, but Harry’s anger rose nonetheless. “*Of course not*,” he replied. “She was bloody furious about the entire thing! How could you suggest that she would put me in danger?”

Ginny seemed reluctant to explain, and he let it go. He sighed, staring at the fire. “Have you spoken to Hermione?” he asked softly.

“No,” came her quiet reply. “She left before I had a chance to catch up to her. But I’m guessing she jumped to the same conclusion that I did.”

“Will you help me convince her that that conclusion is erroneous?”

"Of course," Ginny said. "I don't know why, but I believe you when you say that you didn't enter. But Harry, to be perfectly honest, I was dreading exactly that. It seemed like just too perfect an opportunity for glory and prestige for you to pass up. It was a chance to show off not only in front of the school, but for the entire wizarding world. It sounded like a chance that you would jump at."

Still not looking at her, he replied, "I won't deny that I considered it. Like you said, it's a golden opportunity to prove that I'm more than just the Boy Who Lived. To prove that I'm a rising young wizard in my own right. But I considered the dangers, and I didn't want to betray those close to me, including you. I made the same promise to you that I made to Daphne, and I wouldn't break that. Someone decided to do that for me."

"It's strange, though," Ginny said. Harry turned back to her.

"How so?"

"Well, what could a person be hoping to gain by entering you in the Tournament? Could it be an older student who admires you, or just wants to see what you are made of?"

"It's possible," Harry admitted. "But highly unlikely. Whoever entered my name also befuddled an extremely powerful magical object in the Goblet. It's called the *Triwizard* Tournament for a reason. It's always been three schools, three champions. The Goblet's magic knows that. So someone extremely skilled would have had to counteract that old magic to make it believe that it had to choose four champions, one from each school. And I was chosen by default."

"Or maybe it was just tricked to think Hogwarts deserved two champions. But I can't think of who would have done that."

"Are you telling me you suspect *Dumbledore*?" Harry asked, disbelief in his voice. "Besides, the other slips all had the school name written on them. Mine just had my name."

"And you know that how?"

"Dumbledore's reaction. I was watching him closely. His eyes slid directly down to the center of the paper. There was nothing to read above it."

"Can you really say that for sure?"

"Yes," Harry insisted. "Maybe I'm not as good as Nott when it comes to reading body language, but I'm getting there."

"I noticed that the two of you were talking tonight. May I ask what about?" Her tone was not demanding, but it was clear that she wanted to know.

"Various things," Harry replied vaguely. "Karkaroff, Aiden Greengrass, things like that."

"Ah. So he was filling your head with delusions of grandeur."

"I wouldn't say that was true at all," Harry said. "If anything, he was warning me of the difficulty of accomplishing what I have set out to do. He also thinks that Karkaroff is hiding from Voldemort."

"*What?*"

Harry stared at her, his emerald gaze penetrating her wide brown eyes. He saw terror, fear, and apprehension there. His brow furrowed. He saw that Ginny had clearly made the mistake of believing that they were rid of Voldemort. "He's coming back, Ginny," Harry said softly, his voice almost a whisper. "There was never any doubt of that. He's not...*human*, anymore. He's obsessed with immortality, and he's corrupted his body so much that he was able to survive *two* reflected Killing Curses. His spirit is still out there. All it needs is a body."

"So he's possessed someone again?" Ginny whispered, looking around as if expecting the Dark Lord to emerge from hiding behind the green Common Room couches. "Could *that* be who put your name into the Goblet?"

"Ginny, you aren't listening," Harry said, shaking his head. "He's realized the severe shortcomings of possession, and he isn't one to

make the same mistake once. He's gathering servants, one at a time, slowly recovering. Eventually, he'll be returned to body."

"But it was destroyed!" she protested.

"Yes, it was," Harry agreed. "But there are rituals, some of the Darkest in existence, that can return a spirit to corporeal form. And when that happens, Voldemort will threaten the safety of the Wizarding world once more. And he'll be more powerful than ever. *This* is the danger that I've been warning you about." He sighed. "I had...dreams during the summer. Dreams that told me that Voldemort was very much...well, I guess *alive* isn't really the right word. But he attempted – and failed – to penetrate my mind. But it's cause for concern. His return is coming soon, Ginny. One of the many things I've made it a point to learn more about is the intricacies of Dark Magic, of its very essence. And one thing I've learned is that it comes in cycles. Fairly predictable ones. And if the Greengrasses have read their rituals correctly, Voldemort will return by the Summer Solstice."

Ginny was deathly pale, shaking. "What can we do?" she asked in a small voice. Then her cheeks flushed with anger. "Why didn't you *tell* us about these dreams?"

"I didn't feel the need to worry you. I'm telling you know because I need to impress upon you the seriousness of the situation. The wizarding world has been at peace for thirteen years. That peace is going to end, and soon."

Ginny just stared back at him, tears glistening in her eyes. She clearly could not think of an adequate response.

Hermione Granger was an extremely bright and perceptive young woman. She was also one of the most stubborn human beings that Harry Potter had ever encountered. And as he'd dreaded, convincing her that her seemingly obvious conclusions were wrong was proving difficult.

"Honestly, do you *really* expect me to believe that *someone else* entered you in the tournament?"

"Yes, I do," Harry insisted. Harry had been looking for his best friend for most of the day. It was Saturday, so they didn't have any classes, and he still wasn't allowed access to the Gryffindor Common Room. He knew the password, but the Fat Lady had explained that she was under strict orders from Professor McGonagall not to allow any Slytherins in, whether they were accompanied by a Gryffindor or not. The only exception was direct family, so Ginny had access if she wanted to visit her brothers. Perhaps because she *couldn't* bring Harry, she rarely took advantage of that opportunity.

"Harry, I'm not exactly *stupid*," she said, her voice still laced with anger and the hurt of betrayal. "I *might* forgive you if you'd just admit it."

Harry had to fight to keep from laughing at that. It would probably just make Hermione even more indignant. "Hermione, we both know that the chances of you forgiving me for knowingly betraying your trust are exceptionally low. Especially if I admit it. In any case, I'd be lying if I did."

"It's just a bit too convenient for me to believe," she explained, struggling to keep the sarcasm and anger out of her voice. "You express interest in the Triwizard Tournament, which is a perfect opportunity for you to showcase your newfound ability, win glory and get the attention of the entire wizarding community, and then, somehow, without your knowledge, someone *happens* to enter you, saving you the trouble? And then, because of some silly magical contract, you just *have* to compete? Sounds bloody suspicious, doesn't it?"

"At least you aren't assuming that Daphne did it."

"Of course she didn't," Hermione replied. "She'd be loathe to place you in direct danger. Truth be told, considering that she's a Legilimens, I'm not sure how you are still in any *shape* to compete. She must be bloody furious."

"She *is*," Harry replied. He killed Hermione's look of triumph and clarified, "just not at *me*. She defended me from the other heads of the schools and the champions. She's royally peeved, but she's accepted the situation."

Hermione laughed, but it was hard, biting cackle, not one of any genuine amusement. “Now *that* I can believe. Always the opportunist.”

Harry sighed. The two of them stood on the bridge over the ravine that separated Hagrid’s hut and most of the Forbidden Forest from the rocky plateau where the castle rested. Both were bundled tightly; the temperature was dropping, and the wind whipped through the closed space, chilling both of them to the bone. But locked in a heated argument, neither seemed to notice.

“What can I do to make you believe me?”

“You can start by telling the truth!” she shrieked, clearly upset, her composure shattering. “You’re lying to me, Harry, and I’ve had enough of it. If we’re going to continue being friends, you can’t do this anymore!”

Harry weathered the storm. Her accusations hurt, but he supposed that his past behavior and decisions were to blame for her suspicion. “Then talk to Ginny. She believes me.”

Hermione scoffed. “I’d expect nothing less. Regardless of how oblivious you might be to it, she still looks up to you, looks to you for approval and guidance. And truth be told, I think you return her affections, but both of you are too bloody stupid to realize it! So I’m *sure* that *Ginny* believes it, but maybe I’m just not as blind as she is.”

Harry’s anger rose rapidly. “It’s one thing for you to doubt me. It’s another thing for you to insult me...and Ginny. She’s your friend too. And there’s nothing between us.”

“I *know* that, Harry,” Hermione replied. “I just *said* as much.”

“Then talk to Daphne.”

“Right. Believe the woman that would take a Killing Curse for you, trust that she won’t just lie to me to protect you. Try again.”

“You just said that if, hypothetically speaking, I *had* entered myself, she’d be bloody furious.”

"I did. But I didn't say I trusted her to be *honest* with me. It doesn't matter how angry she is at you, Harry. Her protective instincts know no bounds."

"Then talk to Dumbledore."

Hermione opened her mouth, as if to point out that he wasn't a reliable source as well, but closed it just as quickly. Harry's eyes didn't leave her as she considered that. She was probably trying to figure out if he would have said something like that without the confidence that he would back up his story. She was probably debating whether to call his bluff. Harry didn't really care; Dumbledore would undoubtedly explain to her what happened. Though he'd prefer if she'd just *believe* him.

"If you're bluffing, I'll find out," she said slowly, but without the confidence or the indignation that she'd had before. "I don't believe that Dumbledore would lie to me." *That's what I'm counting on.*

"I know," Harry said. "So, what's it going to be? Are you going to chose to believe me? Or are you going to show so little faith in me that you are going to call my bluff? Which it *isn't*, by the way. A bluff, I mean." He stumbled over the words, trying to keep the upper hand and appear as confident as Hermione was uncertain.

Hermione looked broken. Her shoulders slumped, and she looked up at him, desperate hope shining in her eyes, although much of her body remained tense with suspicion. Her face softened. "Harry, I really *want* to believe you. My gut says that you are telling the truth. But my *head* says that you are lying to me, and I can't ignore that."

"Then just accept that I *am* telling you the truth, and leave it at that," Harry coaxed. "Because it's bloody freezing out here, and I can't do much if you simply refuse to believe me, regardless of what I tell you." Frustration was beginning to leak back into his voice now.

Hermione sighed. "Alright, I believe you-"

"Thank you."

“-but I want you to look me in the eyes and tell me that you didn’t enter yourself or had foreknowledge at all.”

Harry did exactly that. “Okay,” she said, sounding drained. “I’m sorry for doubting you. It’s just...”

“I haven’t earned your trust with my actions in the past,” Harry finished. “I understand. Please try to have a little more faith in me, okay? I’m *trying* to be more honest with you, but the fact remains that we simply have great philosophical differences on a number of issues, and certain things that I do or think of doing have a tendency to send you hurtling off the deep end.”

Hermione didn’t like that; he could tell by the way she was biting her lower lip, something she did when she was anxious. But she didn’t explode in protest. She just nodded reluctantly. “Fine.”

Best friends of three-and-a-half years, they stood there, in the howling wind, staring alternately at one another and the wooden planks that made up the floor of the bridge. “Hermione, there *is* something that I should tell you. Something that I *have* been hiding, for the reasons I just described.”

“So then why *are* you telling me?”

“Because I told Ginny, and I don’t want you to feel shunned or anything like that. I can’t be completely honest, because you two will bite my head off, but I can at least make sure you both know the same amount...anyway, it amounts to this: I started having dreams this summer, and a number of different signs are pointing to the fact that the return of Voldemort is near.”

He continued, and filled her in on all the details. She was about as happy to hear the news as Ginny was, although she didn’t seem nearly as surprised. “So what does this have to do with you? And by extension, with us? Are you going to start a new training regimen, or something? Or are you planning to run off to Romania or wherever-the-hell he’s hiding and finish him off?”

In spite of himself, Harry chuckled. “No, that’s not in the plans. But I would like both of you to keep training...” He trailed off, grimacing,

“...and I want you to approach Professor McGonagall about learning to control your talents. They could serve you *very* well, Hermione, and you should start trying to master them. As for Ginny, she could use improvement pretty much everywhere, even as advanced as she is. And yes, I’m going to keep practicing some of the magic I learned over the summer with Daphne.”

Hermione avoided his eyes. “C’mon, you’re going to have to do it sooner or later!” he practically screamed at her. “Even Dumbledore has said that it’s a good idea. It’s *dangerous* to possess the power that you do and still have absolutely no clue how to use it. What are you so frightened of?”

She still seemed reluctant to answer. Any more and she might bite clean through her lower lip. “Harry, it’s just...no,” she said, shaking her head. “I don’t *want* to learn how to control it. As hard to believe as this may sound, I’m much more inclined towards *reading* about powerful magic than actually performing it.”

“That’s a terrible excuse.”

“*Is it?*” she retorted, her tone angry and cutting. “It sounds like you are trying to pressure me into doing something that I don’t want to do. As far as I know, that isn’t something that *best friends* are supposed to do, Harry. So what does that say about *you?*”

Harry winced, and her anger faded. “Dammit, Harry, I’m sorry...I didn’t mean for it to come out that way.”

“And I’m sorry that it might sound as if I am pressuring you into getting this training,” Harry replied, “but that doesn’t change the fact that you have a *responsibility* to learn how to control your power. You nearly took my head off twice, if you’ll remember.” She flinched and looked away. “I’m hardly angry about it, particularly because I basically provoked the second one, but I’m a bit worried about what will happen if you just ignore your...proclivity with fire.”

Hermione closed her eyes, as if fighting a mental battle. “Alright, she said, opening them. I’ll do it. I’ll talk to Professor McGonagall after lunch, and she what she thinks.”

They continued to stand there, a terrible silence between them. Both felt guilty, yet somehow vindicated. Or, at least Harry did. Hermione could be hard to read at times. Ginny could probably tell him what she was *really* thinking. She often picked up things that he missed, or misinterpreted. "Where were you going anyway?" Harry asked, trying to change the subject.

Hermione was unfazed. "I was going down to visit Hagrid."

"Checking in on the Skrewts?"

"Merlin no," Hermione said, shivering at the thought. "Hagrid's interest in dangerous magical creatures can be charming and alarming at the same time, but I can't find a single redeeming quality of those animals. They can't do anything but inflict harm."

"Might be useful in warfare, but not much else," Harry agreed. Absently, he tucked that thought away for future use. As unappealing as they were, Blast-Ended Skrewts would be a tough opponent for even the most experienced death eater. "I'll come with you. I haven't seen Hagrid out of class recently."

"Be warned, he's convinced that you entered yourself. And royally peeved, I might add," Hermione cautioned. "I overheard him ranting to himself as we left the Feast last night."

Shivering, they dashed down the stone steps that led down the hill to Hagrid's hut. There were no Skrewts in sight; smoke poured from the chimney, and a light was on. Hermione took the lead and pounded on the door. "Hagrid?"

She stepped back and the door was pushed slightly open. Not because Hagrid was overly suspicious, but because he was desperately trying to restrain his aggressively-cheerful boarhound, Fang. He peered out the door and noticed Harry, but said nothing. He held Fang back by the collar and opened the door, allowing both of them in. Hermione immediately raced over to the fireplace to warm up, rubbing her arms frantically. Harry followed her at a more leisurely pace. Hagrid finally let Fang go, and he made a beeline for Hermione, who calmed him with a well-placed scratch behind the ears. He settled at her feet, growling contentedly.

Hagrid smiled. "Yer the only one that can do that, yeh know." Hermione shrugged at she continued to please the mighty dog at her feet. Hagrid turned his attention to Harry, looking at him suspiciously, his eyes not-so-discreetly brushing over his green and silver scarf. It had been a long time since Hagrid had been suspicious of him merely because of his house assignment, but Harry guessed that his deep-rooted distrust of Slytherin House probably still affected his thinking. "Yeh shouldn't have done that, 'Arry. I know yeh think yer up to it, but yeh betrayed Dumbledore and put yerself in *danger*." Hagrid was clearly being diplomatic. His body language along, his muscles taut, veins in his neck pushing through his skin, made that obvious.

"I didn't do it, Hagrid," Harry assured him, staring into the half-giant's eyes. "I didn't enter myself."

The Groundskeeper turned to Hermione for confirmation, who, to Harry's relief, nodded. "He's telling to truth. I believe him."

"*After some convincing*," Harry muttered under his breath.

Hermione glared at him, but agreed, "After some convincing."

Hagrid looked at the same time skeptical and relieved. "So then what 'appened? How'd yer name get in the Goblet O'Fire, then?"

"We're still trying to figure that out," Harry explained. "By *we*, I mean myself, Daphne, Dumbledore, and Snape."

Hagrid's eyes narrowed. "*Snape*?"

"He's my Head of House, Hagrid, and I trust him...to an extent." Which was true, of course, but so were her reservations about the man's character and agenda. Harry found it difficult to believe that Snape actually cared for him, seeing as he still found it impossible to forgive a man buried six feet under for thirteen eyes. But Snape was at least interested in his welfare...if not for sentimental reasons.

"What does Dumbledore think?" Hagrid asked next. This didn't surprise Harry in the least. Of all those that admired Dumbledore, Hagrid had no equal. He practically worshipped the man. Dumbledore had given him a second chance in life, after his first had been unjustly

snatched away by the schemes of Tom Riddle. Hagrid implicitly trusted his wisdom, judgment, and opinions, and thus would want to know what the man's theories were.

"I honestly don't know," Harry replied. "One has to consider that he was in the company of Madam Maxime, Karkaroff, Barty Crouch and Ludo Bagman, so he may not have shared his private thoughts. But I got the sense that he was as baffled as I was.

"What do you think, 'ermione?" he asked, his expression grave.

The bushy-haired Gryffindor shrugged. "I honestly don't know. I would have guessed Karkaroff, but it seems unlikely."

"What do yeh mean?"

"He's a coward, Hagrid," Harry explained. "He might have been a Death Eater, but he became their enemy when he started naming colleagues left and right in an effort to escape Azkaban. I doubt Voldemort would give him a second chance to prove his loyalty after that. He's not one to forgive and forget when it comes to betrayal, and at this stage, I doubt he would take a risk using someone whose loyalty was questionable. And Snape's been keeping a close eye on him."

"That's reassuring," came Hagrid's sarcastic reply.

Harry met his eyes. "Hagrid, like it or not, you and Snape have something in common: both of you were given a second chance by Dumbledore. In Snape's case, he provided both a career and a way to stay out of Azkaban. I can't see him betraying Dumbledore baring extenuating circumstances that I just can't imagine at this point."

Hagrid walked over to the steaming tea kettle in the fireplace and poured them each a cup. Harry and Hermione thanked him as he sat back down on his bed. "Well, I suppose that makes sense. But, regardless of who entered yeh, yer competing. 'Ave yeh started ter think 'bout that?"

Harry shrugged. "I've known for less than a day, and before that I never imagined having to think about it. We weren't given any indication of what the First Task would be, so its hard to prepare."

Hagrid looked conflicted about something. Then he made up his mind. "I might be able ter help yeh with that. Yeh see, the First Task requires some o' my...special expertise."

Hermione looked horrified. "*Hagrid! You're not supposed to help him!*"

Harry stared at her. "You can't *really* believe that any of the Champions are going to obey that particular rule, can you? Cheating's a part of the Tournament, and it always has been. And when you have school pride, not to mention the prestige of the Headmasters on the line, it's inevitable."

Hermione exploded. "I understand that, Harry, but it's still a *rule*! I'm unhappy enough about you *being* in the Tournament to begin with; can't you at least *play by the rules*? Who cares if you *win* the bloody thing? And what about *Cedric*? What is he supposed to do?"

"Hermione, if I intend to *survive* this whole thing, I'm going to need some additional training that I can't acquire without adult help. And as for Cedric, I'm not sure what to do, but I have been thinking about him."

Hermione looked deeply conflicted, biting her lip so hard that Harry feared she might bite clean through it. "Are you *sure*, Harry? I just have trouble believing that you are *that* far behind the Seventh Years. At least in terms of the skills that you've acquired that you would need for the Tournament."

Harry laughed slightly, "The truth is that the average Seventh Year probably doesn't have the skills. Cedric, Delacour, and Krum are hardly average, but they won't be cruising through this by any means."

"Dumbledore said the Tournament would be safer..." Hermione began to protest.

"For the *spectators*, maybe. Not the Champions."

“That’s *horrible!*”

“Welcome to the Wizarding World, where our favorite sport is a violent affair with four players reserved exclusively for hitting iron balls at high velocities at other players,” Harry said, deadpan. Hagrid gave him a questioning look, but said nothing. “We love to pretend that we’re more civilized than Muggles, but outside of the drunks outside of the pubs we’re several centuries behind.” Harry’s cynicism was something he rarely allowed out except in a situation like this. Bad-mouthing the wizarding world wouldn’t make him many friends in his House.

Hermione blinked repeatedly, then shook her head. “I give up,” she said, shoulders slumping. “Why bother standing up for common decency anymore. You and the rest of Wizarding kind just ignore it. But we can’t leave Cedric out to dry.”

“No, we can’t,” Harry admitted. “But I’m really stumped on what to do about it. I can’t directly aid him.”

“Could you give him subtle clues or something?” Hermione asked. “He’s a nice boy, Harry; I don’t want to see him hurt.”

“Neither do I, and I suppose that would be the best course of action. Of course, that all supposes that I actually know something useful to tell him.” He turned to Hagrid. From what the man had said already, he had more than an inkling about what the First Task involved.

“I’ll tell yeh what: when the right time comes, I’ll send yeh a note ter you ter meet me in the right place,” he said, using pretty much all of the secrecy and deceit that he was capable of, which wasn’t much.

“It’s a date,” Harry said, “Thank you, Hagrid.”

“If yeh get hurt in this thing, it’s not goin’ ter be my fault,” he promised. “Yeh’ve gotten hurt too many times on me watch, and I’m not going ter let it happen again.”

Harry nodded, and the conversation progressed to less pressing and serious matters, such as Hagrid’s quest to discover the proper diet of the Blast-Ended Skrewt.

If Harry was to gain the allegiance of even a few of the purebloods in Slytherin House, he knew that he would have to prove himself in their eyes. And that meant taking down Draco Malfoy, the de facto leader of the 4th year Slytherins and a boy who exerted a potent influence on the rest of the House by the sheer respect and fear that his surname commanded. Had Draco's last name been anything other than "Malfoy," his attempts to command power would have been laughable.

That was not to say that the Malfoy Heir was not a dangerous enemy. Well-trained, skilled, and relatively powerful for his age, he was indeed a threat. But his grasp of pureblood tradition and politics lagged behind Harry's, and unlike Nott and Greengrass, he was not skilled at hiding his emotions. He was arrogant, spoiled and unprepared for the realities he would face.

But regardless of all his shortcomings he had been fortunate enough to be born the son of Lucius Malfoy and Narcissa Black, each representing two of the most respected and feared pureblood lines. Virtually every pureblood could trace their lineage back to the Blacks, including, however indirectly, the Potters. But it was Lucius's past as Voldemort's top enforcer that gave Draco the position of leadership that he enjoyed. And so if Harry, an outsider, was going to earn the respect of his classmates, he would have to find a way to take down Draco Malfoy. Of course, it wouldn't be entirely honest of him to say that the sole reason he wanted to best the Malfoy Heir was to gain influence. He also hated the boy, and everything he stood for. And Draco had also had the gall to threaten Hermione and Ginny.

He'd debated the best way to initiate a challenge to Malfoy's authority, ranging from openly insulting him to challenging him to a duel. He dismissed both options. The first would have little impact, and make him appear desperate. The second would be vetoed by Dumbledore, and Hermione and Ginny would never let him hear the end of it. Instead, he decided to bide his time. He knew that he was an irritant to Malfoy. His fame, accomplishments (which, though minor, still surpassed anything Draco had done) and burgeoning power a constant threat to his authority. Malfoy had confronted him twice this year, and each time Harry had deflected his assault. Perhaps it was

best to simply wait out the boy, and look for the right opportunity. He guessed that another chance would soon be coming. Malfoy would *definitely* think he entered himself into the Tournament and would look upon that as Harry throwing down the gauntlet, challenging him to somehow backup his position of power with his own notable accomplishments. Knowing Malfoy's thought processes, it was obvious that rather than trying to prove his worth independently, he simply try to best Harry. How he planned to do that remained a mystery, but it was not one worth trying to solve, not until he had more information.

The weather grew colder as November progressed, and so did the attitude of the Hogwarts student body towards him. Most of the Gryffindors (sans Hermione, of course) were outraged that a Slytherin would be representing them, especially a Slytherin that had embarrassed them in Quidditch so often in the past. Fred and George Weasley hadn't believed a word of Ginny's explanation that he actually *hadn't* entered himself, as Harry had predicted. It was difficult to blame them. The truth was that he hadn't entered himself, but all evidence was to the contrary, and they were certainly jealous because they perceived that he had beaten the system where they had failed. The good news was that Harry hadn't been the subject of any humiliating pranks yet. The bad news was that that meant the Twins were in the process of planning them, and so he was constantly on his guard. Even the threat of Ginny retaliating wasn't going to be enough to stop them. Ron Weasley had engaged in a rather overt shouting match with his sister over the entire episode, one that had escalated to the point that wands were drawn before it was broken up by Professor McGonagall, who put both of them in detention. Ginny had returned from her experience cleaning the floor of the Great Hall under the watchful eye of Filch seething at her brother, and hadn't spoken to him since. Harry often wondered just how much the Weasley parents knew about the feud between the Slytherin and the Gryffindors in their family.

Then had come the "Support Cedric Diggory" Badges, which Harry had considered a pathetic effort by Malfoy to embarrass him. The fact that he had appeared unmoved, even amused by Draco's efforts only seemed to anger the young pureblood heir. A few days ago, Harry had used a spell discovered by Hermione to change the alternate

script to something rather unflattering that concerned Draco's parentage. It was childish, possibly as immature as the original act, and he'd gotten a detention from Snape, but it had been worth the effort. Draco had had a tantrum in front of half of his house, and since then the appearance of the badges had been few and far between.

His interaction with the other champions had been limited. Cedric continued to believe that Harry had entered himself, and seemed to be a bit peeved about it. Still, he was reasonably polite and hadn't been among the denizens of Hogwarts wearing the stupid badges. Fleur preferred to act as if he didn't exist. Viktor Krum, who could often be found in the Library surrounded by a gaggle of admirers, didn't seem to be inclined to socialize with anyone, let alone a competitor.

His classes were going well. But as with last year, he found his marks, except in Potions and Defense, slipping farther and farther behind Hermione's as his distractions and a degree of his own laziness got the better of him. She was even beating him in History of Magic, attributable to the fact that even *Harry* was having trouble staying a wake after four years of the incomparably boring Professor Binns and his extraordinarily un compelling lectures. He wasn't sure he'd learned anything of any importance in the last two years of that class either. As interested as he was in Goblins, learning about their various rebellions in breathtaking detail, particularly from a heavily biased wizarding perspective, did little for him.

He continued to practice his magic, making use of the infinite resources of the Room of Requirement, honing his body and his mind, sharpening his spellcasting, becoming more efficient and strategic in his use of magic. Snape's warnings about the dangers of using powerful magic recklessly had struck a deep chord within him, and he was now making every effort to ensure that he would be able to get through the Tournament without inflicting harm upon himself. If history was to be believed, the challenges that he would face probably wouldn't require much help. The Champions were supposed to be challenged, an even though Dumbledore had said that the Tournament had been made safer, there would still be great danger involved. Actually, it was likely to only be *safer* for the crowd in the grandstands; Hermione had mentioned that one of the primary

arguments for the suspension of the Triwizard Tournament had been the catastrophic incident that had involved an out-of-control mantichore, two dead Champions, three dead judges, and hundreds of members of the crowd killed or injured before the monster had finally been put down.

But Harry was determined to make a good showing of himself, and he understood that he was facing the best that Durmstrang and Beauxbatons, and possibly Hogwarts, had to offer. Krum was definitely a personal student of Karkaroff's, and a similar relationship might exist between Fleur and Maxime. Harry had Daphne. Once again, Cedric was left alone. But at this point, there was nothing he could do about it.

Harry stopped for a breather as he reached the steps leading to the Main Entrance of Hogwarts. He'd been taking his morning run around the lake, something that Daphne had insisted upon to get him into top shape. Daphne's style of fighting was physical and aggressive, with nimbleness and agility essential to survival. Quick thinking was important as well, and as Daphne had explained, *"a duel needs to be half-strategy, half-improvisation. You can plan a sophisticated strategy before hand, but its almost impossible to know how a foe of equal or near-equal skill will react. That said, I also don't think much of being predictable. Eventually, someone will figure out how to beat you. Bellatrix Lestrange, for example, is well-known for her frequent use of the Cruciatus Curse. I haven't fought her in over twenty years, but I've been devising a variety of strategies in my mind. I think I could beat her now. But most witches and wizards aren't nearly as predictable. Working with your strengths only goes so far. It's best to be well-rounded, and expand your options. Remember, in a duel, your opponent knows as much about what you are about to do as you know what he is about to do."*

Daphne's advice was very wise, and Harry had taken it to heart. He'd experimented with combinations of spells, focusing in particular on combinations that included a spell that the afflicted wizard would have to end in order to continue the fight. Those few seconds could be decisive, especially if one struck quickly with a powerful spell. He'd even asked Ginny to teach him the Bat-Bogey Hex, which he knew would be extremely useful if he could catch an opponent off guard.

The problem with it was that like most spells intended more for entertainment value, like the Jelly-Legs Curse or Long-Tooth Curse, it was pitifully easy to block; a shield hastily conjured by almost anyone would do the trick. They weren't designed for combat, and it showed. They also had little force behind them; a moderately-powerful deflected Slicing Curse still produced a physical impact when it struck a shield, one that could throw a duelist off balance if they didn't immediately plant their feet.

"Training already, Potter? Think if you pack some muscle on that skin-and-bones frame you might actually have a chance to survive this?"

Harry glanced up, irritated and fatigued from his run, and glared daggers at Draco Malfoy, flanked as always by Crabbe and Goyle, who followed him around like a pair of malevolent puppies with the intelligence and creativity of a Flobberworm. Both would have easily failed out of Hogwarts if they didn't have influential fathers, both of whom actually gained their influence from Lucius Malfoy. "You ought to join me sometimes, Malfoy," he said, breathing heavily, but grinning. "Weather's nice," he said, indicating the threatening overcast sky and cold air that was settling on his sweaty clothing and giving him a bit of a chill. "Think you might be projecting your own physique onto me, mate. There are people that could help you with that, you know?"

Malfoy's cheeks reddened slightly, but his face remained composed for the most part. "I'm sure you think you're a genius, outsmarting that fool Dumbledore and getting yourself even more attention."

"I'm sure I'll deserve it in the end," he said, shrugging. "Not sure I can say the same of you. After all, what have *you* done, *outside* of spawning from the right male and female?"

Crabbe and Goyle cracked their knuckles menacingly, but the fact that Malfoy didn't visibly react to his taunting told Harry that he had serious business to attend to. "So, anyway, what was it you wanted to talk to me again? Besides fitness advice, I mean?"

"You're treading dangerous waters, Potter," Malfoy said, his voice an icy imitation of his father's. "You think that you'll win the hearts of

Hogwarts with this silly, foolhardy stunt. But you are making dangerous enemies.”

“You know, you’ve been saying that for a while. Care to back it up?” The sarcasm in Harry’s voice was no longer light-hearted, but hard and biting.

“I might ask the same of you,” he countered. “You’ve got a penchant for ending up in the Hospital Wing, that’s for sure. That ridiculous affair with the forest, the Stone, the Chamber, the Hippogriff...am I missing any?” he asked. “Oh, right. You fell off your broom.”

“I appreciate that you care enough to remember all of the times that I was hurt, Draco,” Harry said, not betraying any of the anger he was currently feeling, although the intensity of his tone probably hinted at it. “But what exactly do you hope to accomplish standing out here? Are you hoping that I’ll catch pneumonia? Do you want to challenge me to a duel? Do you want to admit your secret love for Hermione?” Despite the disgust he felt allowing those words to pass his lips, he grinned, watching Draco’s composure shatter. *Oh, she’d kill me for saying that...*

Again, Malfoy surprised Harry. Instead of issuing a spittle-launching angry denial, his glare became colder. Either he’d been preparing for the confrontation for a while, or his father had finally taught him the ways of the proper pureblood. Now, if Pansy Parkinson could progress to this level, he’d *really* be impressed. “You know none of those things are true, Potter, and I certainly harbor no affections for the *mudblood*. What I’ve come here for is to give you a warning. *Back off*. This is *my* House. I don’t appreciate your pitiful attempts to usurp my position.”

Harry considered the proper response. “You do realize, of course, that the only reason that anyone in Slytherin has the slightest respect for you is because of your last name? You’ve done absolutely nothing, beaten *me* in absolutely nothing, since you arrived as a First Year.”

Malfoy didn’t respond. It seemed as though his strategy was to ignore Harry’s derogatory comments and focus on his goal. It was a much better approach than the one he’d used previously, which was to get royally peeved every time that Harry insulted him. “*How* I obtained my

position isn't really important, Potter. Whether by my father's accomplishments or my own, I command immense respect and influence. Respect and influence that you cannot hope to challenge. So I suggest that you stop *trying*."

Harry smiled. "Slytherins are nothing if not proud, Draco. And regardless of how much the name of your father might strike fear into their hearts, our classmates' pride will not allow them to follow a weak and beaten leader."

"It is fortunate, then, that I am neither of those things."

"The first," Harry replied, "is a matter of debate. But the second, well, let's just say that I itch to end your *unbeaten* status. I'll take you, Malfoy, in anything resembling a fair fight. If you must, bring your sidekicks. They'll fall so fast that their presence won't matter. And then it will be you and me. Alone. Nothing but our heads, our guts, and our wands. Will you be feeling so confident then, Malfoy? Friendless? Alone? Facing a clearly superior opponent?"

"You underestimate my skill, and overestimate your own, Potter." He flashed a predatory grin. "How would you like to be *friendless* and *alone*, Potter? I can *arrange* that for you..."

It took everything he had to stop himself from attacking the pompous arse right then and there. But he knew that it was not the proper time. And a fight started in anger was not a fight at all. A duel was cold, emotionless. Two machines fighting, sometimes to the death. Emotion clouded the mind, poisoned the decision-making process. Angering an opponent was often one of the best ways to beat him. Even though some spells were enhanced by strong emotions, uncontrolled emotion, be it rage or ecstasy, was the enemy of any duelist; Daphne's obliteration of the Death Eater squad notwithstanding. Even she had drained herself, and left herself vulnerable to counter-attack, though she had escaped before it could come from the survivors.

"Just try, Malfoy," Harry whispered. "Perhaps it is *you* that underestimates *their* skill *and* my ability to train them."

"We'll see about that."

Both had thrown down the gauntlet. Now, there was no going back. There was only one way that this could end, and it was the humiliation and defeat of one of the combatants. Harry had been given an opportunity, and he'd seized a stranglehold.

Hermione is going to kill me. But she'll understand eventually. Hell, this might even serve as added incentive to harness her power. Ginny needs to be prepared as well. Malfoy is a sneaky bastard, and he doesn't play fair. If he tries to make good on his threat, he'll do it when they are vulnerable and alone. My job is to make sure they escape, and then to finish off Malfoy in a revenge duel.

These thoughts ran through his head as he locked eyes with Malfoy, both wordlessly swearing to do their part. This clash was inevitable, and when it ended, it would be final. The loser would never rebound.

"We'll see each other again Malfoy. And my wand will be at your throat." His voice was that of cold determination, not anger.

"We shall see." And with that, he and his bodyguards turned and marched back into the castle. He stood there, shivering in the early morning chill, dressed in sweat-soaked exercise clothing, gathering his thoughts. With renewed determination, he followed Malfoy through the doors, making a beeline for the Slytherin Dormitory. He had to find Ginny, and then gather Hermione, and figure out a way to tell them what they so desperately didn't want to hear.

A/N: Well, I promised that I'd try to keep the angst between Harry and his friends over the Tournament to a minimum, and I think that I accomplished that.

Daphne, in her most lucid moments, is still a sharp and thoughtful woman. Of course, the problem is that she isn't always that way; in fact, there are times when she is a few steps away from the Permanent Ward at St. Mungo's. Some think she should already be there, but you try telling her that. Ginny, clearly, has not forgotten what she saw Daphne do to Amycus in the Forest a year ago, and it shows in her questioning of Daphne's motives. This is a point of conflict that has great explosive potential. Harry might be more aware of her faults, but his love for Daphne hasn't weakened much.

Hermione's actions in this chapter might need some explanation. After all, she has been, to the point that some of you have expressed your dislike of her seemingly endless resistance, staunchly opposed to a number of the philosophies that Harry has embraced. And in this chapter, I feel that for parts of it, she's quite in-character. She stubbornly refuses to believe Harry as fast as Ginny did, she defends regulations and fair play, and she remains somewhat frightened of embracing something far outside of her preferred bookworm experience. Hermione doesn't have nearly the ambition of Harry or Ginny. No doubt that she wants to learn as much as she can about magic, but she doesn't look into her future and hope to be great and famous. Harry certainly does, even though he sees his chance coming as a warrior and leader in his teens, and isn't optimistic about his chances.

But, eventually, Hermione does relent, something she's been doing more often. If you compared this to her resoluteness in the last two parts of the series, it's a bit inconsistent. Hence, this prolonged explanation becomes necessary.

It comes down to this: Hermione has finally realized that she can't fight against the morals and expected codes of behavior of the wizarding world all by herself. She's come to the realization that war is indeed coming (note how she was more depressed than shocked to hear about Harry's dreams and their significance) and that Harry will be a huge part of it whether she likes it or not. She's finally discovered that the Wizarding World is a very different place from the one she grew up in. And this brings me to another point. Harry's cynical comment is in many ways an embodiment of my own thoughts about the world that Rowling created and I expanded. I was surprised by many things that Rowling did, but one of them was my surprise that she contrasted the wizarding world against, basically, the Dursleys. That's hardly a fair comparison, but since the books are written from Harry's perspective, shaped by Harry's knowledge and world-view, and set in a location real enough to be believed yet fictional enough that our own experiences don't really apply, we tend to look at the wizarding world in a very positive light because, Malfoys and all, it's a hell of a lot better than Privet Drive, home of a brutal, appearance-obsessed family that dotes on their child and neglects a blood relative. But the wizarding world, in my opinion, is far behind

the Muggle World. Think about it: the wonderful wizarding world might have magic, but it's also a place where teenagers are placed in mortal danger before they're old enough to drive in most of the United States, the favorite sport is exceedingly violent and played by young teenagers, the leader of the British wizard community accepted bribes to let murderers walk, and a system of privilege and bigotry based on bloodlines that we got rid of at least a century ago runs strong. I like my little, peaceful, non-magical existence.

A bit of a digression, but it helps explain a few themes I've been getting at. Another thing to be remembered is that none of the characters are perfect, and most of them are deluded and mislead in one way or another. Ginny's going to get a bit of a boost in her character next chapter, but it won't be a new power or anything like that. Letting everybody do something special isn't what I had in mind. I'm also trying to build a solid foundation for Harry and Ginny's relationship, something I know that some of my readers are dreading. Be assured that their relationship will remain relatively secondary, although it might gain huge importance in the end...just not the way you think. Harry is the one Boy Who Lived, and the only one with the power to defeat Voldemort.

Hermione will start her training in the next chapter, and you'll get a look at a side of McGonagall rarely seen, because Harry and Hermione view her quite differently. I'm also going to write a scene from Ginny's perspective.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter Nine: Fire

"I wish you would have warned me."

Hermione's response, given in a resigned tone with maybe a hint of anger, was considerably less passionate than that which Harry had been dreading. He'd been expecting her to rage at him for putting her life as well as Ginny's on the line for the sake of House politics. Ginny's reaction wasn't subdued. It was rather enthusiastic, actually. She seemed to be itching to get back at Malfoy, although she didn't seem to have the same grasp on the situation that Hermione had.

"I mean," she continued, "you did basically tell Malfoy that we're free game. And I appreciate how important knocking him off his perch is to gathering allies. We're not just talking about the 4th Year class. And personally, I wouldn't mind seeing you wipe the floor with him. I just wish that I didn't have to be involved."

"That's not possible," Harry explained. "You and Ginny are my friends, and Malfoy doesn't like to play fair. You are always going to be connected to me and you are perceived as more vulnerable. I expect Malfoy to try to exploit that. So I want all three of us to train hard so that we can defend ourselves. And I want you to go to McGonagall and get training. You told me you would."

"I've just..." she broke off, breathing deeply. "I've just been trying to work up the courage, the resolve. I don't want to get into something and then lose the will to keep going. I don't want to disappoint Professor McGonagall."

"I understand that. But though it was not my intention, this latest series of events should stress to you how important it is that you improve. That goes for you too," he said, glancing over at Ginny. The fiery redhead nodded, her face set and determined, brown eyes smoldering.

"I'll do whatever I have to. I want to get better. I want to be able to protect myself."

"Are you going to ask for Daphne's help?" Hermione asked next. "Is she going to train all three of us?"

Harry shook his head. It had occurred to him, but they had to keep up appearances, and it would be difficult for her to slip in and out of Hogwarts without being seen. Even if she was helping him prepare for the Tournament they had to maintain the appearance that she was not. "No, but I'm sure that she can at least advise me on what to work on. If you aren't busy, I'd like to spend a few hours running a few mock duels, just to see where you are. Try to be inventive and creative. If there are injuries, we'll deal with them. Madam Pomfrey doesn't ask a lot of questions, and even if this does get back to Dumbledore, he'll understand. Actually, though he's not allowed to, I'm guessing he'd encourage us if he could."

He clapped his hands together, closing his eyes. When he opened them, the room had transformed into a carbon copy of Daphne's dueling room. "Let's get started."

For the next three hours, they dueled, alternating in and out of the fight. Sparks flew, a few minor cuts and bruises were suffered, but nothing more serious. Harry took notes as he watched his friends duel, noting sequences of spells, weaknesses or strengths, flaws in technique, and emotional control. He bested his friends every time, but did not overwhelm them, to his pleasant surprise. He stood off to the side now, sweat staining his robes, still breathing heavily, watching his friends engage in an increasingly aggressive duel. Hermione seemed to know a great variety of curses and hexes, probably the product of hours of reading during the summer.

Ginny appeared much improved from the last time he had seen her. She fought like a bulldog. The ferocity of her attacks was surprising, a bit stunning to both Harry and Hermione, actually. She cycled through spells, putting little thought into the selection process. She constantly stayed on the offensive, battering at her opponent's defenses, making them waste time and energy by dodging. She allowed emotions to get the better of her several times, which, in this duel, had allowed Hermione to recover and fend off her attacks while launching a few of her own. Both girls were drenched with sweat after the intense twenty minute duel. Finally, it looked like Ginny had triumphed. She launched a sequence of three Striking Curses followed by a Burning Curse, then two more Striking Curses, biting out the incantations like curses (of the foul language variety.) Hermione faltered under the

onslaught, though her Shielding Spells, which were more consistent and durable than Harry had expected, carried a longer endurance and more stopping power than he'd seen before. Ginny's Shielding Spells remained weak and inconsistent, although she didn't use them all that often. The Gryffindor fell to her knees, throwing up one last weak effort before Ginny's last salvo knocked the wand from her hand. But in the split second before it did so, she fired off a Bludgeoning Curse.

Ginny's triumph was short-lived. Although Hermione's fatigue, both magical and physical, meant that her last spell was considerably less potent than it might have been, Ginny was caught unawares and hurled off her feet, hitting the ground hard a few feet away. Hermione was unsteadily getting to her feet, so Harry hurried over to his younger friend. She groaned, but pushed him off when he tried to help. Their eyes locked for a moment and Harry felt something that he had suppressed rising within him, but the contact was broken and the strange feeling faded away.

"Damn it," she gasped as she got to her feet, this time accepting Harry's aid. "I almost had you."

Hermione, looking absolutely exhausted, bushy hair sticking to her face, grinned. "But you let your guard down."

"You got lucky."

"Doesn't change the fact that-"

"We'll call it a draw," Harry said, trying to avert the argument before it had a chance to get heated. "You were both fantastic. And a lot better than the last time I saw you."

"I did some reading," Hermione admitted bashfully. "I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to get any ideas. Honestly, though, I had no idea Ginny could fight like that."

Harry turned to face the petite redhead, who was leaning against the scarred wall for support. "I suppose I picked up a few things from my brothers."

“Fred and George?”

She nodded. “And Bill went at it with the two of them once or twice. They beat him pretty soundly.”

“You *definitely* did more than just watch,” Harry observed. “You looked comfortable...well, at least confident in what you were doing. I...I was quite impressed.”

“Thanks,” she said. He thought he saw her blush, but her face was flushed from the exertion, so it was difficult to tell. “Yeah, I got into it a few times. Bill didn’t like it, nor did Ron. For different reasons of course. Bill was trying to protect me; Ron just didn’t want me to get better than he was. Fred and George were all for it, though.”

“Did you fight them at the same time?”

She nodded. “Yeah, once. It’s like they can read each other’s minds. They reacted faster than I could think, coordinated their movements to overwhelm me. I was done after about a minute.” She pulled up her right robe sleeve to reveal a mostly-healed bruise on her upper arm. “Picked up this in that duel. I was sore for about a week.”

“What happened when you fought them one-on-one?”

“I won about half of the duels, actually,” she said, smiling proudly. “Bill told me that I should worry about defense, so I didn’t. I just stayed on the offensive, but alert enough to dodge anything that came my way.”

“It works,” Hermione said, speaking from experience, “at least in your case,” she added. “I was almost a goner on several occasions.”

“We can definitely work with that aggression,” Harry told her. “You need to control your emotions, not allow them to leak.”

“But my emotions are what fuels my desire to keep going.”

“I know,” Harry agreed, “but it’s possible to funnel all of that emotion into the spell-casting, and not allow any of it to escape. That’s when you run into trouble. But you’ve come a long way. I feel a lot better about both of you, but there’s work still to be done.”

“Not today, though,” Hermione said, gasping for air. “I’m about to fall over, and I *stink*. Shower and lots of sleep, and then we’ll talk.”

Hermione Granger had often been inside Professor McGonagall’s office. She looked up to her Head of House, and had even helped her grade some of the younger students’ papers on a few occasions. Other times, they would continue conversations that had been started in Transfiguration, discussions they’d been unable to finish because of the demands of teaching. The Transfiguration professor never minded when Hermione came around, and even seemed to enjoy their interaction.

So it was difficult to fathom why she hesitated to enter her office, pausing at the threshold of the partially open doorway. The lights were on inside, so McGonagall was clearly working, but that had never stopped her before, and, far from irritating her, Hermione’s presence always gave the Transfiguration Professor a much needed break. But now she could move, standing, feeling more and more idiotic and cowardly, and waiting for something to tell her to enter. She reached into her pocket and her hand squeezed around the handle of her wand, and that somehow reassured her. She took a deep breath, then slipped inside. “Professor?”

The tall, elegant woman glanced up from her parchment-covered desk, setting aside an essay into one of several neat piles. “Miss Granger? What can I help you with?” Her tone was as clipped and formal as it always was, but there was an underlying familiarity and friendliness that wasn’t present when she addressed many of her students.

“Professor,” she began nervously. “Well, I’m sure Professor Dumbledore spoke with you about the possibility of training me...”

The woman nodded. “He did, several months ago. Am I to take your presence as a sign that you are indeed interested in learning to harness your power? I would have expected one as enthusiastic about learning and improving as a witch to have come to me shortly thereafter. That said, I believe I know why you did not, and if I am correct, that is perfectly understandable. It isn’t easy to possess

power that you do not know how to control, power that can cause injury to those that you care about.” Her voice was soft, almost motherly. Her sympathy, even empathy, was clearly genuine. Yet Hermione did not feel at ease.

“I guess I sort of put it off for a while. Honestly, I was a bit scared,” she admitted, moving closer to the woman’s desk. “I’m used to being the smartest kid in my class, but not to being better at anything else.”

“Understandable,” McGonagall said, still not getting up. She peered through her glasses at the young woman before her. Hermione felt decidedly uncomfortable, as if she was being studied in some kind of experiment. “What I must ask you, before we begin is this: why?”

“Why...?”

“Why do you want to do this?” she asked, her voice strict and impersonal now. “Is it because you wish to control your power? Is it because you are afraid of hurting other people or yourself? Is it a desire to learn more about what you are capable of? Is it because Mr. Potter pressured you into doing it?”

Hermione froze on her last question. “How do you..?”

“If you are wondering, Miss Granger, no, I do not spy on your sessions in the Room of Requirement. But I am aware of its existence, and aware that you have been using it,” she explained. “And I am quite familiar with Mister Potter’s mindset at the moment, as much as I may disapprove of children as young as he engaging in House politics. But such is the way of Slytherin House, and who am I to stand in the way of that?”

The rhetorical question hung in the air as both women considered their words. McGonagall found hers first. “Is it a fairly straightforward question, Miss Granger? And I am asking it in part to determine if it is worth my time and effort to train you. Personally, I believe that Albus is more qualified, but he disagrees. So answer the question.”

Hermione thought for a long moment. Too long. “Miss Granger, if you cannot answer the question, then it is clear that this is *not* worth my time. Or yours. I want you to tell me, in a cogent fashion, why it is that

you have come to me. I can only give advice; I cannot make your decisions for you.” Her tone was impatient and anxious.

“Well...” Hermione began hesitantly, “I certainly want to learn to control my power...and I don’t want to put myself or my friends in danger...and I suppose that I’m curious to see what my own limitations are, as well.”

McGonagall nodded. “Then let me ask you this: Who is more eager for you to learn under my tutelage: you or Mister Potter?”

That was a loaded question, and Hermione knew it. “It was Harry...but now, I really do have a genuine desire to learn more about my abilities, to have some control over them.”

The Transfiguration Professor nodded. “Very well, then we can begin. I didn’t mean to put you on the spot, Miss Granger, but this is going to require a great deal of time and effort on both of our parts. I am willing, but I needed to know if you were. I have many duties, and I am willing to sacrifice them for you, if you will give me the same commitment in return.”

“I will,” Hermione promised. She meant it, too. This was important to McGonagall, and it had become even more important to her. She didn’t like to think of herself as a coward; she liked to believe she simply wasn’t reckless. But it wasn’t really possible to qualify this as reckless.

McGonagall finally got up, crossed the room, and sat down on one of the student desks. “Take a seat, Miss Granger,” she asked. Hermione pulled out a chair and sat, facing her.

“My own story begins very early in my life. Around the age of ten or so, like most wizarding children, I began to experience bouts of accidental magic. However, in my case, while a number of friends were setting clothing on fire and the like, I was unconsciously transfiguring objects, even animals. As you might expect, my parents, who both belonged to old Light families, were somewhat alarmed, especially because they believed in the letter of the law and did not give me any magical instruction until they were legally allowed to do so. Powerful accidental magic isn’t uncommon, but for an untrained

girl of my age to be performing such complicated spell work was unheard of.”

Hermione nodded, fascinated. “I too was frightened of my own abilities. I once became irritated with the barking of our dog while I was trying to sleep, and transfigured it into a mouse with a thought. Bear in mind that I was in an upstairs bedroom, and the dog was in the backyard. I taught myself, perhaps out of that fear, not to allow my emotions to grow so intense that I might use magic. It served its purposes, but living in fear is not a pleasant way for a child to grow up.”

Again, Hermione nodded. “I’ve just tried to forget that I have these special...abilities.”

“I would guess that you haven’t met with the greatest success.”

“No, ma’am,” Hermione admitted. “Of course, it’s rather difficult to compare my situation with yours. The only time my abilities have ever manifested themselves was when I tried to use fire-related spells. What do you suppose that means?”

McGonagall considered that for a moment. “It means, Miss Granger, that you will likely never be very proficient with wandless magic. That capacity is something that we are born with or without. Mr. Potter is an exception, as his family historically has never been particularly gifted in that regard either. Of course, in his case, he possesses that ability because he absorbed the tainted magic of one that *does* have skill at wandless magic.”

“Tom Riddle,” Hermione said.

McGonagall nodded. “Exactly...but I digress...after I came to Hogwarts, my teachers became frustrated with my unwillingness to draw upon my full potential. I always held back, afraid of what would happen if I let go. That is where Albus intervened, and dare I say made me what I am today. Professor Dumbledore was the Transfiguration Professor when I arrived, and he taught me to harness my power, to use the emotion control that I developed because I feared losing control of my feelings to my advantage. He

refined my skills, and I became one of the greatest Transfiguration students that this school has ever seen.”

“But my point is not to impress you with my exploits, but to demonstrate to you that I understand what you are feeling, and that I am more than willing to help. I also understand the amount of effort that we both must put in to control your abilities and you must also be careful not to become dependent upon them. During my tutelage with Albus there were times where I felt it unnecessary to give my best in other classes. I became convinced that my affinity with Transfiguration would allow me to defend myself and earn a very good living. Eventually, I corrected that error in judgment. I would prefer if, in your case, no correction needs to be made.”

“I think I can do that.”

McGonagall stared at her, as if trying to read her emotions. As far as Hermione knew, she wasn't skilled in Legilimency. “Very well then. I would like to start off with a bit of a test. I've never directly dealt with anyone with abilities such as yours, although there are quite a few recorded historical cases, so I want to run a little experiment.” She rose. “Let's go to my room for this.”

Slightly befuddled, Hermione followed her Head of House up the staircases to the Seventh Floor and the Gryffindor Dormitory. They gave the Fat Lady the password and entered the Common Room. McGonagall led Hermione down a small hallway off of the Common Room to a locked door. She opened it and gestured for Hermione to enter, then followed her in, closing the door behind them.

McGonagall drew her wand and moved toward the empty fireplace jutting out from the wall. The room they were in wasn't vast, but it was large enough for a bed, several couches, a desk and chair, and several bookcases. The Transfiguration Professor whispered a few words, and a fire began to burn, despite the lack of timber. McGonagall remedied that by summoning several pieces of wood which appeared in the fireplace, feeding the dying flames. Once the fire had taken hold, she stepped away. “Miss Granger, I would like you to see if you can affect this fire in some way.”

Hermione started. "But, Professor, I thought you said that I probably didn't have the capacity for wandless magic."

"I did, and I still believe that. However, what I am asking you to do is something quite different. I am not asking you to use any kind of spell to affect the behavior of the flames. I am asking you to attempt to use your own magic to affect something that you clearly have an affinity with." McGonagall's tone was not scolding, and Hermione could detect some sympathy in her voice and her gaze, but she was still nervous. Slowly, she extended a hand toward the flames, closing her eyes, and *pushed*.

She felt nothing, and opened her eyes. The flames seemed unaffected, burning no less or more brightly than they had been before. She looked toward the Gryffindor Head of House for confirmation. "Nothing happened," she said. "Try again, Miss Granger. If you are indeed capable of this, I wouldn't expect you to get it on the first try."

Hermione nodded slowly and repeated the process. She pushed harder this time, trying to imagine the flames bowing back in the face of a rush of power, tried to imagine physically touching the flames, pushing them back without sustaining any burns. She opened her eyes. Still nothing.

She tried again. And again. And *again*. Her frustration multiplied with each attempt. She groaned in frustration. "I just can't *do* it," she said. "I don't know what I'm doing wrong. Actually, I think that's the problem. I have no idea what I'm *supposed* to be doing." She tried to control the volume of her voice in McGonagall's presence, but it was a struggle.

The tall woman merely blinked. "As I said, Miss Granger, I was never certain you'd be able to do this in the first place, and I knew that even if you could it would be difficult. You have allowed your emotions to get the better of you. That is something you will need to work on."

"I know that," she admitted. "I'm sorry; I should have come in here with a better attitude."

McGonagall studied her for a long moment. "Miss Granger, this is not going to be an easy process, but I have faith that you can get through it. You simply need to share that faith."

"I'll try."

"We've done what we can for today. Please, relax for the rest of the day. Spend some time with your friends, or pick up a good book. It will help, I assure you."

Hermione nodded, and with a slight nod, left the room to begin searching for Harry and Ginny.

Harry often said that he didn't possess the agility of his guardian, but that was not readily apparent at the moment. In fact, to the observer, the opposite seemed to be true. Harry moved about the dueling chamber with grace and purpose, loosing a barrage of powerful magic at the far wall. His eyes burned with fierce intensity, locking with his target, unblinking. He dove to the side, for no reason other than to practice evasive maneuvers as he continued to hone his accuracy. Purple fire splashed off the masonry, singing and chipping the ancient stone.

Naked from the waist up, sweat glistening off his muscled body, Harry Potter attacked, again and again, moving methodically, if not slowly. Yet out of sheer spontaneity he would occasionally mix in a defensive move, throwing up a shield to block a powerful counter-curse that existed only in his mind. He drew his wand back, barked an incantation, and a long, thin coil of green fire spread from the tip of his wand. He lashed out at the wall again and again, attacking from a myriad of angles, wielding the whip with a fluidity and natural skill that she hadn't realized that he possessed. The Fire Whip Curse, taught by Nymphadora Tonks, had become a dangerous weapon.

Finally, he allowed his concentration to break, and the tendril of fire vanished. He stood there, panting, staring at the damage he had inflicted on the wall, damage that the Room of Requirement was rapidly repairing on its own. He walked to the back of the room, picking up a glass of water, draining it, and then toweling himself off.

Then, he turned to the girl that had been watching him. “Ginny,” he said, a bit surprised.

“Expecting someone else?” the petite redhead asked, a sly grin splitting her face. Of course, at the moment she was trying to focus on Harry’s flushed face and not his upper body. Harry didn’t respond to her comment, and quickly donned the shirt he’d discarded during his workout.

“To answer your question, I thought Hermione was going to come around,” Harry said, grinning embarrassedly at her. “Not that I mind you being here, of course.”

“Right,” Ginny replied, laughing nervously. “I just wanted to check in on you, see how you were doing. You certainly did a number on that wall. I didn’t realize you had that kind of control.”

“Thanks, I’ve been working on it,” Harry replied. “But the Fire Whip Curse is the exception, not the rule. For some reason I’ve taken well to it, although it’s probably still below average. I haven’t made much progress at all with the Bludgeoning Curse, and less with the more advanced shields that Daphne taught me during the summer.” He sighed. “Progress is measured in minute amounts.”

“Cheer up, at least you’re making progress,” Ginny said. “I’m sorry I haven’t been showing up for some of the training sessions lately. I’ve been hanging out with Melissa and Anne a lot, plus I’ve had a lot of homework.”

“Don’t worry about it that much. You have good friends, Ginny. You can learn a lot from them,” he said, stretching some of his aching muscles. “Though, I would like it if you’d occasionally tear yourself away from them and join us down here.”

“I know. Well, I’m here now, do you want to work on anything?”

Harry’s response was not one delivered in words. Instead, he answered by grabbing his wand from out of nowhere and delivering a Striking Curse aimed at her gut. She reacted, but only got half of the incantation out before she was sent skidding across the floor. She groaned, getting to her feet and glaring at him. “What was *that* for?”

she demanded. "I just admitted to you that I'm out of practice and need to devote myself more to training."

"I know you did," Harry replied. "And that's an important step. *More* important is for you to realize how badly you actually need this training. You are in *danger*, Ginny, and I cannot stress that enough." His tone wasn't angry, more frustrated. "I'm sorry I had to do that, and I didn't mean to hurt you, but it proves a point. You aren't capable of conjuring a shield fast enough to do any good. And as much progress as you've made on the offensive end, you can't just rely on attacking. Sooner or later, they'll strike back, and frankly, Ginny, your defensive skills are deplorable." His words hung heavily in the air for several moments.

"Thanks for the words of encouragement," she said in a hurt voice. Harry was telling the truth, of course, but it didn't make it any easier to hear. Besides she *hated* to disappoint Harry. She looked up to him as fellow Slytherin and a friend, and more of an older brother than Ron ever had been. Harry believed in her, and she wanted to prove him right. And she hadn't been able to do that.

"I don't mean to discourage you," Harry explained. "I just want to make you more aware of your shortcomings so that you can address them. I want you to be prepared for what you have to face."

Ginny sighed. "Then how do you suggest that I *do* that?" she asked, frustrated. "Why do you even *bother* with me? I'll never be half as powerful as you or half as bright as Hermione! I'm just a...I'm just an *average* witch." There were angry tears in her eyes, which she just as furiously tried to blink away. Shame welled up within her, and she turned away, staring at the wall, unwilling to see Harry's reaction. She blinked in surprise when she felt a hand on her shoulder, and tried to pull away. Harry's grip was firm, and he did not allow her to escape.

"You aren't *average*, Ginny," Harry said in a soft voice. "I've seen you at your best. You have a great deal of untapped potential. You just need to believe in yourself, believe that you are... *worthy* of this extra training. Because I believe that you are, and I just wish that you could as well." Ginny stiffened as she felt Harry's arms surround her, and he backed off, probably confused at her reaction. Before he could

respond, she turned around and stared into his eyes, trying to see if he was being honest in his assessment. She'd always been good at judging that, though she wasn't sure why. What she saw both reassured her and added to her anxiety. His faith in her was genuine. Now she had to reward it.

They stared at each other awkwardly until Harry finally averted his eyes. "Maybe a more practical demonstration might help," he suggested. "Do you want to give it a go? I can go easy on you; try to build your confidence?"

Ginny had mixed feelings about that. She understood that in her current state, she probably wasn't in great shape to fight a mock duel with Harry, who even at his worst was probably better than her at her best. But she didn't want any victories that she might garner to be tainted by the fact that Harry hadn't been giving his all. Nonetheless, she relented. Drawing her wand, she marched silently in the dueling ring provided by the Room of Requirement, turning around sharply to face the other side where Harry was just now getting into a ready position. She took a deep breath and then blew it out, letting her body relax, right foot forward, knees bent slightly, fingers holding her wand firmly, but not with a crushing grip. She held her wand straight, pointed at Harry's midsection. Their eyes met as he withdrew his wand from his robes, matching her stance with a few minor, personal adjustments, including shifting his feet a few inches in opposite directions for better balance and letting his left arm hang limply at his side.

Harry struck first. In one motion, he drew his arm back, then stepped forward as he snapped his wrist and barked out the incantation for a Striking Curse. Ginny froze for a split-second, and had to dodge the curse rather than deflecting it. She landed off-balance, putting her at a disadvantage. But Harry didn't take advantage of her weakness. The knowledge that he *could have* made her all the more motivated not to let it happen again. She retaliated for the opening blow by spinning out into a crouch, then firing three quick Burning

Hexes, shifting her aim by a few inches with each successive cast to make deflecting them more difficult. Nonetheless, Harry was able to fend off her attack, though he had to back up a few steps. Ginny

pressed her slight advantage, hammering away with a trio of Striking Curses, and then loosing a Blasting Curse, aimed not at Harry's body, but at the ground near his feet. Harry recognized this instantly, and opted to dive out of the way as the hail of magic blew a crater in the stone where his feet had been. He landed lightly on the balls of his feet, showing the agility that he refused to give himself credit for.

Harry didn't hold back this time, loosing a pair of Stinging Hexes, which Ginny quickly realized were just the precursor to Harry's main offensive effort. That came in the form of a Bludgeoning Curse that struck her weakened shield like a massive club, knocking her back as the majority of the curse's energy blasted through her defense. By instinct more than anything else, she managed to twist her body and land on all fours, like a cat, bouncing back onto her two feet without much conscious thought. She saw Harry's eyes widen in surprise at her feat, but he was still ready for her counteract, deftly batting a Stunning Spell into the ceiling.

They circled each other like a pair of predatory animals, searching for weakness and opportunity. Ginny shot off a Flinging Hex but missed, and had to dodge Harry's in-kind return. It was obvious that Harry was allowing her to dictate the pace of the contest, not casting his own spells until she had a chance to make her own move. It was as if they were playing a strange game of Wizarding Chess, taking their turn and then waiting for their opponent's response, however long it took to come. Ginny decided to go with the only strength that she felt she had, and hammered away with a salvo of low-powered spells, trying to overwhelm Harry's stalwart defenses. But what few spells managed to get through he easily evaded, and she had little time to plan her next attack before she was spun around by another Bludgeoning Curse, met by another weak attempt at a shield. Harry clearly wasn't going to let her win, but he was going to give her the opportunity to prolong this battle as long as she could, and to improve her defensive prowess at the same time.

The traded blows again and again, neither combatant showing a great deal of creativity or strategy. Harry chose to react to her attacks rather than take the offensive, and Ginny tried to use her aggressiveness and superior quantity of the spells that she cast to negate Harry's superior quality. But she was growing frustrated with

her inability to even make Harry move his feet, even though he was sweating with exertion. But she was also feeling the strain, and her muscles burned with every spell she cast. She was rapidly approaching exhaustion, and was probably going to get there before Harry did.

She batted aside a Striking Curse from Harry, and then decided to go for the victory before she was too tired to do so. She unleashed all of the frustration and anger that had built up inside her, supercharging her spells as she cast them, feeling the her magical core being depleted by this effort, feeling her body sag as she drew up what little energy she had left. A barrage of light shot at Harry's position, each color representing a different spell. She sucked in a breath as she felt her energy leave her, and her body sagged. She stumbled backward, then glanced up to see the results of her handiwork.

Harry had hastily attempted to block the first round of her spells, but his unrefined defenses weren't up to the task. He was spun around, landing hard on his side before another pair of spells hit him as he lay sprawled on the ground. The rest of the spells missed, slamming into the wall and leaving a dozen scorch marks and small craters.

Ginny staggered backward, struggling to stay conscious. She lost that battle, collapsing at the base of the far wall, just as she saw Harry roll over and watch her go down.

Ginny awoke to someone shaking her gently, trying to rouse her but at the same time trying not to hurt her. She forced her eyes open, surprised by just how difficult that was. She was still fighting to stay awake. The blob of color before her began to sharpen into the inverted concerned face of her friend. "Ginny?"

She groaned, trying to roll over, to go back to sleep. She realized that she was actually lying against Harry's chest, his arms around her, and that only deepened her embarrassment. She tried to shove him away, but her efforts were weak at best. Still, he seemed to sense that she was uncomfortable and helped prop her up against the wall. "Are you okay?" she asked, eyes flicking to his midsection, where she'd seen her curses hit him.

"Fine," he said, almost automatically, clearly unconcerned about his own well-being. "I'm more worried about you." His eyes, still looking her over, reflected that concern. That was the sole motivation behind it, but she still felt awkward and uncomfortable. She crossed her arms tightly over her chest. "I'm fine, Harry," she repeated, adding more emphasis this time. *Please, just leave me alone. It's bad enough that I couldn't even make you lose your balance without knocking myself out. Now I have to deal with you inspecting me like my mother to make sure I don't have the slightest injury.*

She tried to communicate this with a look, and must have succeeded at least in part, because Harry didn't look at her when he spoke next. "You probably exhausted yourself when you supercharged all of those spells...that was rather impressive, by the way," he added. Ginny thought he was probably just trying to make her feel better. She supposed that she'd never really had a chance to actually beat him, and that by knocking him down she'd probably exceeded her realistic expectations. It didn't make her feel much better though, that was for certain.

"Thanks," she said, mustering a false smile. He grinned awkwardly back. Something unsaid passed between them, something that both reassured Ginny and frightened her. She struggled to get up, at first waving off Harry's attempts to help her, then reluctantly accepting them, trying not to let him see how much she was blushing. "Well, I guess I'll go back to the Common Room. I'll be okay on my own," she promised him. Actually, she wasn't so certain of that. Her knees were shaking, she was short of breath, and her walk was unsteady. She felt like she might collapse halfway there. But she didn't want Harry to see that if it happened.

"Are you sure?" he asked, sounding skeptical. "You look ready to keel over at this very moment."

"Gee, thanks, Harry," she replied, a bit of obvious sarcasm injected into her voice. "I'll be fine, really." Before he could reply, she managed to walk out of the Room of Requirement, leaving her friend behind her, probably very confused.

Ginny made it about halfway before she faltered, just as she'd predicted. She leaned against a wall to stay on her feet, as students passed by alone or in small groups. The weather wasn't pleasant on this day, and so the hallways were very busy by students trying to explore the depths of the place or just meet up with friends. None of the students noticed her, something she was both disappointed and relieved about. Once she'd regained a portion of her strength, she pushed off from the wall and continued the trek. She managed to get into the Entrance Hall before her strength failed her again. She was starting to wish that she'd accepted Harry's offer of help. As embarrassing as it would have been to be half-carried into the Common Room, it couldn't be nearly as humiliating as if she passed out cold in the middle of the Entrance Hall and had to be taken up to the Hospital Wing in a stretcher.

"Ginny!" a voice cried out. A female one, not Hermione's, but Melissa's. She sighed with relief. The somewhat excitable Slytherin Third Year dashed over to her, looking her up and down quickly, her blonde hair flapping wildly with her motions. "What have you been up to? You look like hell? Do you need help?"

The flurry of questions threatened to overwhelm her, but she kept her senses about her. "I'll tell you later...and yes, I could use some help. Can you help me get back to the Dormitory?"

"Sure," she replied, surreptitiously pulling Ginny's arm around her back, snaking it under her cloak. Ginny appreciated Melissa's understanding of her situation and desire not to show weakness. She supposed that it was something common to all Slytherins, and not exclusive to her. Nonetheless, the gesture meant a lot. She spent a lot of time with Melissa and Anne, as much as she could while she wasn't hanging out or training with Harry and Hermione, but she still felt guilty for excluding them. She was grateful that they understood, or at least, didn't mind being left out. Most of the students in her House wouldn't have done the same. There was something to be said for not embodying every quality of your House.

The two friends made it down the stairs and partway into the dungeon before Melissa suddenly stopped. Eyes half closed, Ginny couldn't

see why, and was about to ask what was wrong when the question was answered.

“What, exactly, are you doing, Miss Quinn? And why does Miss Weasley look ready to faint?” Snape’s icy cold voice carried not a hint of amusement. His eyes were searching and suspicious.

“Nothing, Professor,” Melissa replied, naturally enough. “Ginny isn’t feeling well, and I thought it best if I take her back to the Dormitory to sleep it off. She’d rather not involve Madam Pomfrey. It’s probably just something she ate.” Ginny nodded mutely in agreement, admiring her friend’s ability to lie convincingly.

Ginny wasn’t sure that Snape had actually believed her, but he nodded, as if they had just passed a test of some sort that determined if they were capable of concealing the truth. She supposed that skill would be a must for most Slytherins. The irony didn’t quite hit her in her weakened and fatigued state.

“Very well,” he said. “I expect to see you in my class first thing tomorrow, Miss Weasley. Else I will expect you to be in the Hospital Wing with something more serious than a stomachache. Don’t disappoint me.”

“Of course not, Professor,” Ginny replied in as strong a voice as she could manage. “I’ll be there.”

With another look, Snape disappeared back into the darkness with a flash of his cape. Ginny managed to make it into the Common Room and into her four-poster bed with minimal assistance. She groggily thanked her friend, then surrendered to her exhaustion. She slept through dinner, but Melissa had made certain to tell her friends where she was, and they didn’t worry.

“Hello Cedric,” Harry said. The Seventh-Year Hufflepuff was slouched over in one of the chairs in the Library, surprisingly alone. He glanced up in surprise, but his eyes narrowed a bit as Harry approached.

“Potter,” he said nodding. “What’s up? I’m afraid you won’t be getting any hints from me.”

"I'd hardly expect you to have them," Harry countered. "Seeing as none of the Champions are supposed to have any idea what the First Task entails."

"Very true," Cedric agreed. "So why exactly have you come searching for me, then?"

"It's not really accurate to say that I was searching *for* you," Harry replied. "Though I would like to make sure that you don't hold any undue animosity towards me. After all, we both represent Hogwarts, even if it wasn't supposed to be that way."

"Be that as it may, Potter, winning the Cup for Hufflepuff means a bit more than winning it for Hogwarts."

Cedric was several inches taller than Harry, with a wider frame and the kind of looks that made girls fawn over him. He was confident and intelligent, by all accounts a friendly and approachable young man who didn't tend to judge others without getting to know them. He came from an old Light Pureblood family that had seen better days, but that still had enough for its members to live comfortably. His father held a position in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, and was well-liked, if not particularly ambitious or noteworthy. Amos was a good, dependable man, and had been asked to join the Order of the Phoenix, but declined the offer to protect his wife and young son. No one had held that against him; being a member of the Order made it possible to fight back against Voldemort and his followers, but it also made a person and those close to him into targets.

Cedric could also be a bit suspicious if he thought a person was trying to get something out of him without giving something back in return. This was one of those times. His blue eyes searched Harry's neutral look, but didn't seem to find the deceit that they were looking for.

"I can understand that," Harry said, "fair or not, your House doesn't tend to get much attention. Most Hufflepuffs are viewed as friendly and loyal at best, soft and cowardly at worst."

Cedric nodded, although the ice between them was not yet melted. "And what motivates you, Potter? Do you too want to win glory for your House? Actually, I'd find that surprising. Aren't most Slytherins out only for themselves?"

Harry ignored the jab. It was difficult to deny truth, after all, and he wasn't interested in defending the virtues of self-interest and personal ambition. Not now, anyway. "I suppose that's true. That said, I'm not really interested in winning this Tournament. It'd be nice, of course." Harry was being a bit dishonest. While winning the Tournament wouldn't exactly bring the Purebloods, Light and Dark, streaming to his side, it would at least be a significant accomplishment that he could point to. It would also widen his advantage over Malfoy. He listened, interested in Cedric's response.

"Do you really expect me to believe that you entered yourself into the Tournament, *illegally*, and don't have any intention to carry the day? That sounds rather suspicious, doesn't it?" Cedric's voice was calm and level, but there was an underlying anger that was only scarcely hidden. Clearly, Cedric felt that Harry had unfairly robbed him of some of his glory and prestige, and this conversation wasn't doing much to change that attitude.

"I suppose you wouldn't believe me if I told you that I didn't enter, that I scarcely thought of entering, and that I'd really rather be watching this whole bloody thing instead of participating in it?"

"You'd be correct."

"That's unfortunate," Harry said. "I'd heard that you were a little less judgmental than this." The off-handed comment was meant to sting, and it did.

"Listen, Potter—"

"You could call me *Harry*," he suggested. "I don't remember making this a formal conversation, requiring the use of surnames. In fact, I began it by calling you by your given name. We're just talking here, *Cedric*."

“Right,” he replied, dubiously. “Well, *Harry*, if that were indeed the truth, that, say, you didn’t enter yourself, do you really expect me, or anyone else besides Snape or someone else close to you to believe that? I mean, it would imply that you were the *victim* of some heinous plot. Forgive me for finding it difficult to believe that a Slytherin could be a *victim*.”

“You’ve made two interesting assumptions, neither one entirely correct,” Harry said. “First, you’ve assumed that I’m close to Snape, probably based on the fact that he defended me when Fleur and Madame Maxime accused me of entering myself. What you should probably understand is that Snape wasn’t defending me because he particularly cares for me. He was doing it to cover his own arse. He was eliminating the possibility that he’d somehow failed to detect my duplicity in the entire thing. Second, you assume that a Slytherin can’t be a victim. That is a far more interesting error in judgment. We are young human wizards, just like you and the rest of the Hufflepuffs. Being Slytherin doesn’t make us evil, or particularly malevolent.”

Cedric blinked. “I guess I shouldn’t have said that...regardless, you have to understand, Harry, that this situation is a bit unusual.”

“I never said it wasn’t. I came here because I wanted to make sure that there weren’t any hard feelings between us. I’m sorry if it seems like I’m trampling all over the glory that should be yours and Hufflepuff’s, but it simply can’t be helped. I’m bound to complete, even if I were dead-set against it.”

“Which you aren’t,” Cedric pointed out. “You certainly don’t seem frightened of what might happen. And if anything that I’ve heard about you is accurate, you are hardly representative of the average Fourth Year.”

“Not to sound arrogant, but I’ll agree with that assessment. As for not being completely opposed to competing, I seriously doubt that you can deny the allure of winning glory and recognition, proving yourself on the national stage, not to mention the thousand Galleon prize money.”

“I was under the impression that you weren’t living in poverty. What, with the combined fortunes of the Potters, the Dresslers, and the

O'Connors. That's quite a collection of wealth, going back centuries. A thousand Galleons is a pittance."

Harry shrugged. "It's nice to have some money that you actually earned, rather than received simply because your parents and much of your guardian's family happen to be dead."

Cedric winced. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that. And I see your point." He blew out a breath. "It's a bit hard to believe, but you seem honest enough."

"I appreciate that, Cedric. And I don't need you to believe me, not necessarily. I just need you to not hate me. I hardly suspect that you would attempt to harm me, but I don't need to be competing against the wishes of the entire school, save my handful of close friends."

"Then I guess I can do that. You are very perceptive, Harry, for your age."

Harry shrugged, taking the compliment in stride. "I'm good at thinking analytically. Human beings are predictable, to an extent. All one needs is a decent understanding of a person's motivations."

"So, do you want to be friends or something? Or were you really just here to make sure I didn't hold a grudge?"

"I'm not against it. I would like to get to know you. I would like to demonstrate to the rest of the school that I'm not the manipulative snake that they think I am," Harry admitted. He felt comfortable now. He wasn't in control, but he'd accomplished what he wanted. Any other positive outcome was a decided positive.

"Hey, what are *you* doing there?" an angry voice cried out. Harry slowed turned to see a Hufflepuff who he vaguely recognized, although his name escaped him. A Third-Year, he thought.

"Relax, Zach," Cedric said, getting up. "We're just talking."

That was his name: Zacharias Smith. A true Light Pureblood, from a family that went back to Medieval Times, had been Hufflepuffs for most of that time, and a family that was almost fanatically loyal to the

Light, and by extension, the most powerful Light Wizard of the time. In this case, Dumbledore. A slender boy with as much arrogance and self-importance as the worst Slytherin, he felt that his bloodlines earned him attention and appreciation. Not the type of boy that he was overly fond of, Harry decided. He reminded him of Malfoy. Ginny couldn't stand him, and had come dangerously close to hexing him after he'd expressed his distaste for working with her because the Weasleys had all but abandoned the pureblood traditions, something he found shameful.

"Right, *just talking*. Bugger is probably trying to poison you or something like that," he grumbled.

Harry's look was curious. "*Poison* him, Smith? Besides the fact that I can think of better ways to incapacitate Cedric, putting aside the fact that I'm not really interested in doing that, why is that the first thing to come to your mind?"

"Because you are a Potions prodigy or something like that."

"You flatter me. Did Ginny tell you that?" he asked. He wouldn't be surprised. He'd shared some of his insight with his younger friend, and if they'd been paired in Potions, Zacharias probably wouldn't have taken kindly to accepting advice from one he considered an inferior. Prejudice was certainly not unique to Dark Purebloods.

"Alright, there's no need for the two of you to get into an argument," Cedric interjected. "Harry and I were just talking. I don't need a watchdog, Zach. I can look after myself. I *certainly* don't need someone four years my junior watching my back, alright?"

Smith gave Harry an angry look and then departed. "I'm not a huge hit in Hufflepuff, am I?"

Cedric sighed. "There's a serious dislike of this batch of Slytherins in general, you and Malfoy in particular."

"That's an insult, you know. Being lumped into the same category as Draco Malfoy."

Cedric smiled. "Then I guess we do have something in common. I guess it would be idealistic to think that all the Slytherins cooperate when they scheme and plan their nefarious activities." His tone was light, and Harry smiled.

"It can get rather nasty," Harry admitted. That was *one* word to describe the rivalry between him and Draco Malfoy. There were other adjectives that could also be used.

"Well," Cedric said, "I probably should be off before Zach comes back with a horde of followers convinced that you mean me bodily harm. I did appreciate this conversation, though."

"If you'd give me a chance, you'd learn that I'm really not the scheming bastard I'm made out to be," Harry said.

"See you around, Harry," the Hufflepuff Seeker said. With that, he disappeared into the stacks around them. Before leaving, Harry glanced at the books that had been stacked beside Cedric's chair. Dueling manuals, he noted. Obviously he'd been right in thinking that Cedric didn't have a great deal of formal training outside of school. Deciding not to linger, he rounded a corner...and right into someone standing just on the other side. Whirling and regaining his balance quickly, he drew his wand without even thinking about it. His warm arm fell away as he recognized his "attacker."

The wide eyes and crimson complexion of Neville Longbottom met his sight. "I'm sorry," he blurted, sounding close to tears. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop, I just-"

"Relax," Harry said, returning his wand to its holster. "I'm sorry that I drew my wand. I was just...startled." He frowned. "You were eavesdropping? Is this Weasley's idea of a joke, sending you to spy? Neville, all kidding aside, espionage is not something that you are cut out for."

Neville shook his head. "No, Ron didn't send me. I was just looking for some Herbology reading...I really like that stuff, you know." He laughed nervously. Harry, of course, did know, but there was no reason to place the nervous Gryffindor under any more duress.

“And you heard me and Cedric talking, and naturally wanted to know what was going on?” Harry suggested.

Neville shrugged. “I suppose. I’m sorry...I know that I shouldn’t have been doing that, but I was just sort of curious. I won’t do it again, I promise.”

“Neville, it’s alright,” Harry assured him. “I’m not angry with you.”

“Oh...okay.” He glanced around nervously.

“Looking for Weasley?”

“Or any of the other Gryffindors. Ron hates it when I talk to you. I don’t really understand why. All of them talk about you as if you the second coming of You-Know-Who or something...not that I believe that, of course. It’s just...weird.”

Harry was hardly surprised, but it still baffled him that Ron, and indeed most of the Gryffindors, insisted upon viewing him in such a light. He hadn’t behaved like an Angel, but he hadn’t killed any fellow students or anything like that. Harry supposed that perhaps it was easier to hate him, and not bother trying to understand the reasons why. The fact that he was a Slytherin was enough. “Well, then you can be proud of the fact that you aren’t as thick-headed as the rest of them.”

Neville smiled at that. Harry smiled back. Neville possessed genuine innocence, and as Dumbledore said, that was something to be prized. It was unfortunate that it wasn’t appreciated more by his peers. “Harry,” he began, stuttering a bit. “I...just wanted to ask...did you really enter yourself?”

Harry blinked. “No, Neville, I didn’t. I don’t particularly want to be in this Tournament, but I don’t have a choice.”

“Really?” he asked. He sounded skeptical.

“Yes, Neville.” Harry tried not to let the frustration he was feeling seep into his voice. The unwillingness of people to believe that he hadn’t cheated the system was maddening, and somewhat disappointing. “I

wouldn't betray Dumbledore's trust that way. I'm going to do my best to win the Cup for Hogwarts, but I really would rather not be part of this entire situation."

"I believe you," Neville assured him. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. You're a good person, Harry, even if no one else believes it."

Again, Harry blinked in surprise. "Thanks, Neville...that's a really nice thing to say."

"Well, I'd better keep trying to find those Herbology texts," he said. Before Harry could respond, he was gone.

Is he even coming? Harry asked himself for the third time in the last few minutes. Hidden under his Invisibility Cloak, he shivered in the cold night air, stiff breezes blowing through the dark woods every few minutes. Hagrid had told him to wait in this exact spot, and said that he would meet him...he checked his watch...fifteen minutes ago. Never mind that he was out-of-bounds hours past curfew, but he wasn't dressed warmly enough to stand around. Hagrid had told him to meet him at the edge of the Forest during their last meeting, something that Hermione hadn't been overly pleased about when she learned it concerned the First Task of the Triwizard Tournament.

Finally, he saw the light from Hagrid's lantern. He also heard voices, meaning that Hagrid was either drunk and talking to himself, sober and talking to Fang, or sober and had company. The first and last were situations he'd rather not face. Two large figures appeared in the path, one recognizable as Hagrid, one...Madame Maxime? Unbidden, the thought of how large their children would be slipped into his mind. Great, so Hagrid had decided to take Harry with him on a date. Hopefully he'd learn something useful about the task, rather than Hagrid's mediocre social skills.

The two half-giants...at least that's what Harry assumed, walked past where he was standing without stopping, so Harry began to follow them. Harry tuned out their conversation and focused on keeping his balance and not revealing his presence. Things could turn ugly very quickly if he tripped on a rock and his Cloak fell off.

Another source of light appeared on the horizon. Harry was puzzled; it was almost as if it was coming from the bottom of a hill. As far as he could remember, the area was flat. As they approached, Harry figured out what had happened.

A massive pit had been dug out of the flat plain, several hundred meters across and about one hundred deep. Inside...*bloody hell...*

Dragons. Four of them, spewing fire as small, ant-like figures ran around firing extinguishing spells and coaxing them out of their massive crates. He didn't recognize the breeds, but dragons weren't his forte. Clearly, the Champions would be asked to do something involving the massive, extraordinarily deadly creatures. *Fight them? Get around them? Take something from them? Kill them?*

"Ain't they beautiful?" Hagrid said. Harry was about to retort when he remembered where he was. "Look at 'em. Very exotic breeds. See that Horntail? That's a nasty bugger right there. Don't envy the Champion who has to face that one."

Maxime seemed equally interested in the dragons, albeit for different reasons. Harry moved as close as he dared. A red-haired wizard yelled up from bellow. "Hey, Hagrid!"

"Charlie!" Hagrid bellowed back. Harry now recognized him as Ginny's brother who'd help them dispose of Norbert, Hagrid's pet dragon during his First Year. Evidently he was helping to handle the Tournament's dragons.

"What's she doing here?" Charlie yelled. "Very romantic spot for a date, Hagrid, but she's not supposed to be here."

"Oh, let it be!" Hagrid yelled back. "S'not going ta hurt nobody."

Harry begged to differ. Fleur would now also know what was to come. Deciding that he'd seen enough, Harry slinked away. So distracted was he by the thought of the dragons that he nearly ran into Karkaroff. He avoided a collision at the last moment. So now Krum would know about the dragons. That left Cedric alone and uninformed.

Harry would have to do something about that.

A/N: Well, first, I'm sorry this is taking so long, although I've finished the next chapter and sent it off to my Beta, who himself has a bit of a busy schedule. I've also discovered that I am in fact human and have made two rather irritating errors. The first is to somehow fail to come to the realization that JKR knew exactly where she wanted Durmstrang to be, and that although I thought it would fit better in Austria/Germany (thinking history here, plus Voldemort's association with the Balkans and the Dark Forest) between the year-round cold weather, access to the sea (they come by boat, remember) and her interpretation of Krum's accent (which is clearly Germanic in origin, not Slavic), Durmstrang, despite the fact that the word itself is a mutation of two German words "Drang" and "Sturm" which translate roughly to "storm" and "thunder" (they were a big part of a German nationalist movement back in the 19th century,) is in fact located in Scandinavia, probably Norway. I yield to the series' creator. As one of my readers pointed out, the Scandinavian languages are most definitely not Slavic, but Germanic. So I changed all references to "Slavic" accents. If nothing else, I will not allow my ignorance of certain actual things to spread. The rest I'll just make up, so I can't be wrong. It works out well there...anyway...

The second boo-boo was forgetting the chronological order of events of the fourth book, namely that Hagrid doesn't show the dragons to Harry until about a week before the First Task, for the perfectly good reason that they aren't there yet. It's kind of hard to hide a bunch of dragons in a giant hole in the ground, especially from the Weasley twins. I also forgot the weighing of the wands came before all of this, so I've improvised a solution. I'd already written 9,000 words of the next chapter before I realized my mistake, and figured it was too late to do much about it.

I'm really trying to develop Ginny's character. I like her, and since Harry and Ginny end up with each other, she needs to be something more than just a naive little girl that Harry likes for reasons unexplained. Or maybe because she's nice. While that is enough of a reason for a relationship in the real world, this is fantasy, and powerful, epic romances kind of have to be based on something a little more impressive. Not that I plan to make this an epic romance, but you get the point. I put Ginny down harder than I meant to, and so

I'm trying to fix that. But, seriously, if Harry finds Ginny attractive, he finds her attractive. I just don't want her to be a flat character. She isn't particularly bold or possessed of strong beliefs like Hermione. She doesn't really have to be, in fact, making Ginny that way tends to make her into a mary sue, which I try to avoid at all costs.

Cedric's a nice fellow, and Harry respects him. Harry also pities him and his house because of the way that they are perceived, something that Harry obviously understands. He hasn't given up on Neville either. At this point, it's not so much that Ron's dictating to him that he shouldn't speak to Harry; Ron's never had that kind of pull to begin with, he was just so boisterous about what little influence he did have that he's really pissed off Harry. Neville is simply frightened of the social consequences of hanging out with a Slytherin, Harry in particular.

I'm not sure how enthralling my descriptions of dueling are. That's one thing I'd really like feedback on.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter Ten: The Curse of Fame

“*Dragons?* They expect you to fight *dragons*? Are they out of their minds? I thought they were supposed to make the Tournament *less* lethal?” Hermione screeched. Harry could understand her reaction; he wasn’t looking forward to facing the massive creatures. Ginny was just shaking her head.

“They can’t be expecting you to *fight* them, right?” she reasoned. “I mean, that would be asking too much. They must expect you to do something else, to get past them, or to get something from them, right?” Her tone was cautiously optimistic.

They were in the Room of Requirement. It was after curfew, but they didn’t plan to stay long. Harry kept an eye on the Marauder’s Map, which revealed Filch and Mrs. Norris cleaning the Great Hall, Snape pacing around in his office and McGonagall sleeping. Hermione assured them she’d get back without the help of the cloak, which Harry and Ginny planned to use to return to the dungeons. The two girls had been anxiously waiting in the room for several hours.

“You make it sound so easy,” Harry remarked. “Well, presumably, whoever entered me into the Tournament wanted to get me killed and this is one way of accomplishing that.”

“Don’t say that!” Hermione yelled. “You’ll be fine; you’ll make it through. But...you just shouldn’t have to be dealing with this...forget you, *none* of the Champions should be expected to contend with those monsters.”

“They aren’t *monsters*, Hermione,” Ginny protested. “They are beautiful and unique creatures.” Her statements were not surprising; her brother Charlie worked and lived with dragons after all. But even she didn’t sound *that* confident in what she was saying, and it was clear that she was as anxious as Hermione. “You’ll figure out something...we just need to play to your strengths.”

“Reckon a dragon could hold a Beater’s bat?” Harry asked jokingly, but it went over poorly. “In all seriousness, I’m just glad that I found out beforehand. Can you imagine, showing up on the day of the First Task and having Bagman say, “Oh, by the way, you kids are going to

get to face something that weighs about one-hundred times as much as you do, that breathes fire and has razor-sharp talons, not to mention teeth. Good luck to all of you!”

In spite of herself, Ginny snorted. She quickly recovered after Hermione glared at her for finding this at all amusing. “I mean, Daphne will probably have some advice, right? Some spells that might be useful against dragons.”

“The problem, Harry,” Hermione interjected, “is that very few such spells exist. Dragons are resistant to most magic, and their armor is probably capable of shrugging off a Killing Curse.”

Harry blew out a breath. “Wow, maybe I am in trouble. Are you sure about the Killing Curse?”

Hermione nodded solemnly. “Yes, I read about it a year ago. They are unique in that regard...not that you would try to use a Killing Curse, of course.”

“Of course,” Harry agreed. The thought hadn’t entered his mind, and even if it had he knew he probably wasn’t capable of one. That said, he was already running through the Dark Spells he knew of, trying to find something that might work. A Stunner would probably be about as useful as throwing a pebble at the dragon’s armored scales. “Well, I’ll run the whole thing by Daphne, and see if she has any ideas.”

Daphne didn’t even blink when he revealed where he had been the previous night, and what he had discovered. The first he had expected; the second, he hadn’t. “You knew?” he asked, a bit angry.

She nodded. “I’ve known for a week, Harry. Actually, I know all of the Tasks now. But while I’ll render as much assistance as I can, I won’t tell you the others. You are the one competing, not I. My objective is to get you through this alive, nothing more.”

Harry nodded, understanding. Daphne was willing to bend the rules, but only to a degree. “Do Karkaroff and Madame Maxime know also?”

She shook her head. "No. Neither does Dumbledore. And I can assure you that none of them are happy about it, especially given that I was told and they weren't. They, of course, assumed that I would tell you. In time, they will be proven correct, but like I said, this is a test of your abilities, not mine."

"Alright, so, what do you suggest for the dragons?"

Daphne shrugged. She'd been rather passive for most of the term whenever Harry had met her. The fierce protectiveness was still there, but it was hidden. Something had fundamentally changed about the way that she interacted with him. At first, he had assumed that it was merely her attempt to be a better instructor, to avoid coddling him and to instead make him face the harsh realities of combat. But that didn't explain her behavior now. Daphne had undergone a profound change, and he wasn't sure how he felt about it. She treated him like an adult now, albeit one she was quite fond of. She was forcing him to solve his own problems, relying on no one but himself, and taking her affections for him out of the equation. It definitely made their interaction considerably less awkward. Harry also noted that it had indeed been quite some time since she had referred to him as her *son*. Indeed, it had been quite a while since he'd thought of her as his *mother*. Had they both come to the realization that they were nothing but guardian and ward, and that was enough? Or had something else happened to change their outlook? Harry didn't know for sure.

"Dragons are, of course, extremely resistant to all kinds of spells. Their hides can deflect almost anything, and they are extremely bright and quick-thinking creatures. Physically, they all possess sharp teeth and claws, quick reflexes, and flight capabilities. Some also have powerful tails, sometimes with spikes, as is the case with a Hungarian Horntail."

"I knew most of that already," Harry replied. "What I don't yet know is how to deal with them."

"I understand that, Harry, believe me, I do." Her eyes had softened for a moment. "I'm scared to death about you competing in this tournament, no matter what face I may show in public. Someone entered you into this competition with the intention of getting you

killed. And Voldemort is not one to rely on things out of his control to do his bidding. If he has to, he will find ways to increase the odds of your death, making the Tasks even more perilous.” Daphne indeed understood Voldemort well, perhaps as well as Dumbledore. Daphne had studied his tactics, his favorite spells and strategies in dueling as well as in planning. She’d once told him that understanding how he trained Death Eaters outside of his inner circle made them three times as easy to defeat. The elite, however, were more creative, and relied on personal preferences and capabilities rather than taking directions from their master.

“What about blinding the Dragon?” Harry suggested. “Would a powerful enough Blinding Curse do the trick?”

Daphne shrugged. “I suppose, but that’s only half the problem. A dragon’s sense of smell is probably better than its eyesight, and its hearing is nearly as good. Blinding a dragon doesn’t mean that he won’t be able to find you. Depending on how mature and experienced the dragon is, it might not cause him or her to panic, either. But it’s a possibility. What else?”

“Well, anything with a physical impact is basically useless, short of a super-charged Bone-Shattering Curse or something like that.”

“Harry, I want to make something *very* clear,” Daphne said in a hard voice. “I do *not* want you to exceed your limits in any way. If you exhaust yourself and fail to incapacitate the dragon, you will have no chance of surviving that encounter. I will *not* bury you, Harry. Do you understand?”

“Perfectly,” he replied. And, honestly, he did. Daphne was correct. If he tried to do something that might exhaust his reserves he’d be helpless and the dragon would most likely kill him. He was fighting something that could crush him by *accident*, after all. This was no normal duel. “Ginny had suggested something,” he said.

“What?”

“Well,” Harry said, sounding skeptical even as he explained it, “she said that I should play to my strengths. She meant Quidditch. And

while I guess that I could dodge around the dragon for a while, he or she would get me eventually. I can't fight a dragon from a broom."

"You don't have to *fight* it," Daphne again reminded him. "Before you get any *other* crazy ideas in your head, I'll tell you this: the dragons are female, and are guarding a nest of eggs, including a false one made of gold. You will be asked to distract the dragon long enough to make off with that golden egg. That's it. Actually, if you killed the dragon, I imagine that wouldn't go over well."

Harry relaxed...slightly. He was really starting to question the sanity of the organizers of the Tournament. Asking teenagers to rob the nest of a female dragon was considerably *less* insane than asking them to kill one in one-on-one combat. That didn't mean it wasn't still extremely dangerous, especially if something was done to the dragon to make it more aggressive, more interested in killing him than protecting its nest. That was the sort of thing that an agent of Voldemort would do; something that would escape detection by most, except those who knew what to look for. "Do you think that Voldemort does have an agent at the school?" he asked. "The person who put my name into the Goblet."

"I think it's likely, but I have no way of knowing who it is. Karkaroff stinks of the Dark Arts, but he also reeks of fear. He's far too cowardly to pull off something like this. He's dangerous, but he's also interested in his own survival. He betrayed his fellow Death Eaters and that is something that Voldemort could never forgive. No, it isn't him. But be watchful of his nonetheless."

Harry nodded. "Is Dumbledore concerned?"

Daphne nodded slowly. "I've had several private meetings with him, as well as a few more in my capacity as a judge. He's definitely concerned, even if he doesn't show it. Minerva is also worried about this. Even Snape seems bothered by it."

"What about Moody?" Harry asked.

"Is that even a question? Of course he's worried. He's as paranoid as ever and hasn't changed much from the last time I saw him, at least not in that regard."

Harry was suddenly curious about something. "What was your relationship like with Moody? I mean, I know that you were his pupil and he was the teacher."

"We weren't all that close. It wasn't a father-daughter relationship, or anything like that. He was my mentor, and I respected and admired him. He was a remarkable man, Harry, and he helped me get over my grief from the death of my family, at least as much as such a thing is possible," she explained. "I was the best student he'd ever had, and he expected great things from me. But he was kind to me in a way that he never showed when he dealt with anyone else. Perhaps I was his surrogate daughter for a time. But that time is past. We've both grown and matured since then, and I've changed a great deal."

Harry couldn't disagree with that. "What do *you* think of him?" she asked.

"He asks for a lot. He's obvious fed up with the way that we've had the real dangers of the Dark Arts hidden from us to protect our innocence, I suppose. His style of teaching is clearly intended to change that."

"Indeed," Daphne agreed. Her eyes clouded over for a moment and bored into the wall, a reflection of anger and grief shining in them. "For most of the students at Hogwarts during my time here, our first experience with the Dark Arts came when we had to treat the wounded from the raid on Hogsmeade. It was incredible that we held out as long as we did," she said, referring to the Siege of Hogwarts during the first war. "There were only a handful of us that knew enough about dueling to contribute to the defense of the castle, including myself, your parents and the rest of the Marauders. We were woefully unprepared, and we lost many students because of it. It's ridiculous how resistant the Ministry is to allowing us to teach students about Dark Magic at a younger age, for fear of corrupting our youth or something ridiculous like that. Those that will turn to the Dark will not be swayed one way or the other by learning what a Slicing Curse can do to human flesh during their Third Year. On the other hand, those that will stay with the Light will not be helpless in the face of battle."

Daphne sighed, meeting Harry's eyes. "There was a great deal of uproar following the Siege. Most in the Ministry were holding off outraged and grieving parents who blamed them for failing to protect their sons and daughters. When Hogwarts opened for my seventh year, between those killed and wounded and those that were withdrawn from the school, including some that had joined the Death Eater, we had barely a third of the students left. The Gryffindor First Year class consisted of two Muggleborn girls."

"You said that some of the future Death Eaters left the school?" Harry queried.

Daphne smiled sourly. "Yes. Technically, Bellatrix, Rodolphus, Evan, Regulus, Snape, Alecto, Amycus, Gibbon, Nott, and Avery never actually finished Hogwarts. They disappeared before and during the Siege of Hogwarts, with the exception of Regulus who was withdrawn from the school immediately following it. I expect that several of them provided key information about the school's defenses to their Master. I knew that several had already been Marked, but there was nothing to be done about it. Snape was the only one that ever came back to sit his N.E.W.T.s, a pre-condition for his employment at Hogwarts. I believe that Dumbledore explained Snape's absence by saying that he was mourning the passing of his father."

"Why was Hogwarts left so vulnerable?" Harry asked. This was the most he'd gotten Daphne to say about the war in a long time. He'd probably learned more about Daphne's schooldays from Remus than he had from his guardian herself.

"Because the Ministry was complacent and incompetent," she said, anger scarcely hidden in her voice. "They assumed that Voldemort would never sink so low as to bring the battle to the children, forgetting that Hogwarts was of monumental strategic, tactical and psychological importance. They were idiots, and most of them paid for it with their jobs. The Aurors were slow to respond and couldn't organize before Voldemort had cast an anti-Apparition ward around much of the perimeter, forcing them to appear in one, small, concentrated area." Daphne closed her eyes. "They were slaughtered. I only saw the flashes of spells from the castle, but after the Siege was over I went out to help clean up the wreckage, against the

Matron's advice. The carnage was horrific. Not a single Auror in the first wave escaped, and the only victory was that they managed to warn the rest to stay away."

"How was Voldemort able to assemble such a large force without anyone noticing?" Harry demanded. "As incompetent as the Ministry was, Dumbledore carried a great deal of clout in his status as a war hero, correct?"

"Dumbledore was also slow to respond, although he gave the Minister plenty of advanced warning. But even then, he was considered to be borderline senile. Dumbledore's age makes him vulnerable to many erroneous stereotypes, but in this case they thought he was paranoid. And they were wrong. Voldemort had made alliances with the Northern goblins in Britain, the remnants of the Dragon Masters in the Alps, the Sirens, the Dementors, of course, and the Vampire clans and Werewolves. Not all of them aided in the Siege of Hogwarts, but enough of them did. He even sent envoys to the Merpeople, although they rejected them in favor of neutrality. He had around three hundred Death Eaters at his disposal, mostly British with a number of Eastern Europeans mixed in. The pull of the Dark Arts has always been strong there, and something like half of Durmstrang's graduating class joined the Death Eaters at one point. Voldemort was in a position to demand anything from anyone, be it money, alliances or the sons of affluent families."

"Do you expect something similar this time around?" Harry asked, finally reaching the question that he wanted answered the most of all.

Daphne shrugged. "Perhaps, although I would expect more wizards and fewer magical creatures. The Siege of Hogwarts was, tactically, a victory for the Ministry. Though they lost a lot of Aurors, Dumbledore's use of the ward destroyed much of Voldemort's force. The Dragon Masters were probably annihilated, and the rest of Voldemort's allies suffered badly. I was nearly knocked unconscious by the release of magic. I'd never known Hogwarts or Dumbledore to be capable of such destruction, but when driven into a corner the man is a fearsome warrior. The Siege of Hogwarts marked the end of large-scale combat operations by both sides, with Voldemort resorting to terrorist tactics with his remaining Death Eaters. And that

strategy proved to be a brilliant one. He managed to pry all of the Dark families away from the Ministry with the exception of two or three, split the Light families down the middle, and frightened away the Muggleborns. The Order of the Phoenix was formed at that point, but even combined with the Aurors we weren't able to anticipate Voldemort's attacks on wizards and muggles alike. His goal was to create terror, and in so doing, undermine the Ministry. In that he succeeded. Without his defeat in Godric's Hollow the Ministry would have fallen. I don't want to imagine what would have occurred in that case."

Daphne looked exhausted, her skin pale, her eyes dull and lifeless. Clearly, this was a very difficult thing for her to talk about, and Harry greatly appreciated that she'd shared this with him. Daphne was a trained observer, had an understanding of tactics and strategy and had no inhibitions when it came to ripping apart those that she felt had failed in their duties. From Remus, he could get the human side, but from Daphne, he could get the entire picture of one of the pivotal battles of the first war.

"Thank you for sharing this with me," he said quietly. "It means a lot, and I know it must have been difficult."

"You're welcome, Harry," she said, a softness and affection that had been absent for months returning to her voice. "I pledged my life to keep you alive and see that you are victorious. By helping you to understand history, I feel that I am working toward that goal. But I never really answered your question."

Harry shook his head. He was grateful for the information he'd already gained, and the strain was telling in his guardian's voice and body language. Her body was tense, her movements stiff and deliberate.

Daphne held out a hand and touched him on the shoulder, looking into his eyes. "It's not a problem, Harry," she assured him. "You need to know this, to understand what lies ahead of you."

"Alright," Harry replied.

Daphne closed her eyes for a moment. Harry noticed that she often did that while she was trying to gather her thoughts, blocking out visual distractions and the identities of those she was speaking to in order to maintain her composure. "Voldemort won't be able to rely as much on the Dark Creatures to help him," she began. "The werewolves will no doubt come to his side, and the Dementors already have, but the vampires will refuse and there may not be any Dragon Masters left. They once numbered in the thousands, but there were barely a hundred left at Voldemort's disposal after centuries of infighting. It's a rare gift to be able to control a dragon, one found only in people in that area of Europe. The base camp where Charlie Weasley and the rest of the Dragon Handlers that the Ministry sent to represent Britain's interests in the area of highest dragon concentration is actually built on the ruins of an old fortress of the Masters from centuries ago. But I digress..." She sighed, gathering her thoughts about her once more. "The Sirens, I must admit, I know nothing of. They are obviously both useful and useless in combat, capable of causing a fatal distraction to enemies but helpless to defend themselves. But they are secretive and recluse, and also suffered heavy losses."

"What of the goblins?" Harry asked. This was an answer he was most interested in.

Daphne shrugged. "Voldemort made the mistake of alienating the Southern Goblins by executing their leader in an effort to intimidate them. They resisted his attempts at alliance and manipulation fiercely after that. Ragnok is a strong leader, and as able a warrior as he is a negotiator and manager. But Voldemort learned from his failure and bribed the Northern Goblins onto his side. They were the ones that resisted Ministry control the most and thus suffered the most heavily during the Goblin Rebellions of the 16th and 17th centuries. The Northern Goblins accuse the Southern Goblins of being collaborators, while the Southern Goblins accuse their Northern cousins of being bad businessmen. Both are criminal offenses in Goblin society. Their differences are irreconcilable, unless they had a common enemy. But the Northern Goblins do not hate Voldemort; he made them richer. The Southern Goblins do, but are also wary of helping wizards."

“What of the other creatures?” Harry asked. “The Centaurs, the Unicorns, the Giants?”

“The Centaurs care nothing for what becomes of wizards in general, but they *will* and have defended their territory in the Forbidden Forest in the past. They helped with the defense of Hogwarts during the First War. The Forbidden Forest is where most of them live, and they seldom leave. The Unicorns are as pacifist as it gets, and are of no importance in war. The Giants will also most likely side with Voldemort. They are tribal and brutish, constantly at war, and as uncivilized as they are depicted to be. Hagrid is the exception, not the rule, and it must be considered that he was raised by wizards.

“That about covers the organized groups of magical creatures. The rest aren’t social enough to come together into one force one way or the other. That being the case, I expect that Voldemort will assemble a greater cadre of wizards, both Death Eaters and pureblood allies. He’ll recruit outside of Britain, probably finding some luck in Germany and Russia, where purebloods tend to favor the Dark. He’ll assemble a sizable force, and there’ll be little we can do about it. The Aurors will never number more than a few hundred, and convincing the French Ministry to help us is about as difficult as convincing a Centaur that the appearance of Mars doesn’t mean there is bloodshed on the horizon. They, like their Muggle brothers, are arrogant and self-righteous pacifists. There will need to be a direct threat to France for them to consider intervention. The best we’ll get is some idealistic Beauxbatons students to serve as cannon fodder. They aren’t trained in dueling either.”

Harry frowned. The situation was worse than he thought. Much worse, in fact. Voldemort was going to have superior forces, one way or another. *At least we have Dumbledore*, he thought. But they needed more. They needed soldiers. Daphne’s words about the unprepared students during the Siege of Hogwarts ran very true indeed. And something needed to be done about that. *But what?*

Soaring high above the Hogwarts Quidditch Pitch was something that Harry normally did when he felt stressed or anxious, but today, he flew with a purpose. Rather than lazily drifting in a rough circle,

occasionally putting on bursts of speed just to break the monotony, Harry jerked the broom up and down, executing dives and recoveries from different angles and directions. He had decided upon further consultation with Daphne that his best chance for succeeding in the First Task was to use his aerial skills to his advantage. It would allow him to negate the dragon's size with his agility, assuming that he indeed stayed airborne. But for now, he put the possibility of being knocked out of the sky aside, as it did little good to worry about the worst-case scenario under these circumstances.

Getting the broom wouldn't be that problematic. They'd recently learned the Summoning Charm in Flitwick's class, and Harry had excelled at it. This was not exactly surprising, considering that Daphne had taught it to him two weeks after he'd come back to Dressler Manor for the summer. It wasn't easy to Summon an object from a long distance, but with proper focus and good spell-casting, it was possible. They'd attempted to find other promising alternatives to the broom, but ended up deciding that it was the best option, especially considering that all Harry was being asked to do was to steal a fake egg from the dragon's nest. The First Task was a little less than a week away, and Harry, while he wasn't feeling overly confident, wasn't that anxious either.

Harry executed another sequence of random dives and dodges, practicing accelerating and decelerating at a moment's notice, working to tighten up his turns and stay under control while evading at high speeds. All of these were things that he would need to stay alive while he tried to decoy the dragon into leaving her nest. He flattened himself against his broom and shot forward, then jerked the handle down and to the right, sending himself hurtling toward the ground. At the last moment, he pulled out of the dive, cutting horizontally across the field, then climbing back into the air. He'd been out here for hours, curfew was rapidly approaching, and he had a pile of homework awaiting him when he got back. He also wasn't looking forward to the Champions photo session tomorrow, especially with the knowledge that Rita Skeeter would be leading it. Daphne's advice had been simple: copy the responses of the professional Quidditch players who had perfected the art of answering questions using a series of clichés that didn't actually provide much information.

Even Skeeter would be hard pressed to invent a scandal out of thin air.

Harry was irritated that he even had to worry about this just a week before the First Task. It had originally been scheduled for two weeks ago, but Fleur Delacour had apparently suffered an allergic reaction to something in the Hogwarts food, something that Harry found strangely ironic, since Mandy Brocklehurst reported that she'd been complaining endlessly about the quality of the dining as compared to what she was used to at Beauxbatons. Harry didn't think the House-Elves were capable of cursing food, but somehow he didn't put it past Dobby. But Dobby would have told him, of course...or not, if he'd instead told Daphne, who had then told him *not* to tell Harry. Meaning that Daphne would have ordered Dobby to sabotage one of the other champions. Somehow, he didn't believe that his guardian could sink to that level.

Deciding that he'd best be heading back inside, Harry swung his broom to the right and began his decent, touching down lightly on the soggy grass of the Quidditch pitch. He dismounted, grasping his trusted and battered Nimbus 2000 in his right hand. He was about to head off onto the path leading back to the castle when a voice with a thick Germanic accent stopped him. "Very impressive. I trust that you fly often?"

Harry turned to find himself staring at Viktor Krum. The older boy stared back at him quizzically. Up close, it was clear how athletic and well-built he really was. His thick eyebrows made his eyes appear small and beady. "Yes, I do," Harry replied innocently.

"Do you play Quidditch?" came the next question. Harry nodded.

"I do. I'm Slytherin's Seeker." Harry's response was calm and casual. He was starting to get the idea that Krum was confused by this. He was probably used to being treated like some crown prince, deferred to by those younger and older than him without a second thought. Harry knew that he might not be the boy's equal in Quidditch, and would most likely never be, but he wasn't easily intimidated. It wasn't in his nature to be submissive. "I saw you fly at the World Cup. Bad

luck, that, but I was very impressed. Your instincts are as good as I had heard."

"Thank you," Krum replied, although his voice had taken on a gruff quality, probably a result of Harry mentioning his spectacular failure at the World Cup when he'd lost track of the score and ended the game by catching the Snitch with his team down 160 points. "You have talent as well."

"Did you come out here to fly also?" Harry asked. He was definitely going to have to use the Invisibility Cloak; it would be well past curfew by the time that he returned. He'd left the Marauder's Map with Ginny, so he'd have to watch up for Filch and Mrs. Norris, the latter of whom he was convinced could sense a magical presence without seeing it. Twice he'd passed by her wearing the cloak, and both times, the Kneazle-mix had stopped and stared directly at him. She hadn't sniffed the air, as she might have done if she'd detected him by smell. She'd just looked at him, fiery red eyes piercing through his disguise. If she did that while Filch was around...

"I did," Krum replied after a long pause. "May I see your broom?" he asked.

Harry turned over the Nimbus. Krum examined it. "An older model, but one of the better ones they've made. By making the 2001, they tried to, how do you say... 'fix something that isn't fixable'?"

"I think you mean, 'fix something that isn't broken'," Harry suggested. "And I agree. The 2001 has a bit more speed, but from what I've heard the handling is a bit suspect, and the balance isn't nearly as good. What's the Firebolt like?"

Krum smiled. "I like it. Very fast, very agile. I'm not sure they'll be able to make a better one for quite some time. Most of the professional leagues are switching to them if the teams can afford them."

"Your English is very good," Harry commented. "Better than many of your schoolmates."

"Yes, my father thought it a good idea that I learn to speak more than just my native language," Krum replied. Harry noted that Viktor had

not actually mentioned what that language was. His best guess was that Durmstrang was located somewhere in Northern Europe. He did know that the school's founder had originally been from Germany, but based on Krum's accent, which seemed to be something he picked up in school, not from his birth nation of Bulgaria. The location of the school in Norway would explain both the enchanted ship they'd used to get here as well as the fur coats they'd all been wearing. Harry found it interesting that while Hogwarts' location was fairly common knowledge, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang did all they could to conceal their locations.

"You also seem to handle pressure fairly well. It's almost unheard of for someone as young as you to make such an impact in the Professionals," Harry observed. Both of them were measuring each other now, trying to learn more about the other without revealing anything overly sensitive. It was a careful dance, and one that Krum probably knew well. As an athlete of such high profile he was under constant scrutiny by the wizarding media, both at home and internationally. His every action and word was carefully broken down and analyzed piece by piece as the sports writers desperately tried to give their readers a look into Viktor Krum's psyche. There had been several editorials about his gaffe in the World Cup that had appeared in the *Daily Prophet* over the following few days, some apologizing and citing his youth and inexperience, trumping his promise over his performance, others claiming that such a crucial error would haunt him for the rest of his career.

"The same could be said of you, I suppose," Krum responded. Harry had expected that. "It isn't often that students your age get to compete in such a dangerous and legendary competition." Harry measured his tone. It was accusatory, but there was an undertone of unpleasantness. Krum clearly wasn't happy that he'd found a way around the rules...at least, that was the way he understood it. Harry decided not to protest his innocence. He wasn't trying to impress Krum, but he didn't want to weaken his image in that boy's eyes.

"The timing is rather interesting, though," Harry added. He had two purposes in mind: one was to lay the seeds of doubt; his statement implied that it hadn't been entirely under Harry's control. The second

was to gain insight into his understanding of the figurative storm clouds on the horizon.

Krum nodded. "You understand," he said. "It won't be long until sports are not so important anymore. More important, pivotal things are coming. My family fears the worst."

Interesting. Krum was showing a bit of trust in Harry's integrity by telling him about his family's apprehension. Harry decided to return the favor. It was neither polite nor practical to expect Krum to pour out his secrets while remaining closed himself. "I can feel it as well," he admitted. "The Darkness is gathering, growing stronger. The first war was only a setback, not a total defeat."

"I suppose that you would know about that most of all," Krum said. His eyes flicked to Harry's scar, uncovered from the wind rushing through his hair, leaving it impossibly disorganized. Harry nodded, trying not to feel self-conscious. It was part of his personal identity, and it was the way that people identified him. His scar was associated with the fall of Voldemort.

"Yet there is much that I don't know," Harry replied cryptically. Which was, of course, true, if not in the sense that Krum believed. He knew why he had survived, understood how his mother had sacrificed her life for him, and in so doing, rescued the wizarding world from the consuming Darkness.

"Whatever may come, Potter, I have little doubt that you will be intimately involved," Krum said. "Even in my country, they speak of you: the Boy Who Lived. I had thought that when I met you, you would be arrogant, spoiled...a bit like myself, really, but with no accomplishments or strength to support your claims to glory. But I was wrong. You are far more perceptive and cunning than I had thought. Your placement in the Slytherin House was no accident."

"And when I met you, I'd expected...shall we say, a conversation more focused around Quidditch than history and the future of the Wizarding World," Harry admitted in turn. By both admitting that they'd misjudged the other, they also demonstrated that their image of the other had been improved by this meeting. Harry had taken late to pureblood traditions and customs, but he'd absorbed the basics of

purposeful conversation fairly quickly. To Hermione, it might seem pointless and arrogant, but Harry understood that above all else, purebloods wanted to know more about the person that they were speaking to than that person knew about them. Secrecy was paramount. But when they met an equal, one who was a match for them in perception and intelligence, that was when strong alliances came into being.

"I have often heard that," Krum admitted. "Unfortunately, I suffer from the stereotype of the uncultured, uneducated athlete. But my father always tried to ensure that I spent as much time on my studies as I did honing my abilities. It has been difficult, juggling the schedule for my final year as well as practicing with the national team. Among them, I am treated like a boy. I am certain that you understand what I speak of."

Harry nodded. The sun had fallen, but the darkness, in the literal sense, did not frighten him. Nor did the young man standing across from him. Krum was clearly honorable, and though a fierce competitor, a rational and intelligent human being. Harry could certainly respect that. "I do," he responded. "There are probably betting pools in Gryffindor on how long I'll survive. I'd like to prove them wrong."

"Then we will have a good competition," Krum concluded. "When the competitors are able and motivated, then the playing field is level. I wish you luck, Harry Potter."

"And you as well, Viktor Krum," Harry replied in turn. "But I'm afraid that I must be going."

Krum nodded. "I think that I will fly some. It will help my nerves. I enjoyed this conversation, Harry."

Somewhat surprised by the use of his forename, Harry said, "As did I, Viktor."

With that, the two Seekers went their separate ways. Harry could not help but feel that he had just accomplished something very, very important.

Snape showed only a hint of irritation when Colin Creevey, the overzealous Gryffindor who, well...admired wasn't quite strong enough..."hero-worshipped" fit much better...burst into his Potions class and announced that Harry was needed for the Weighing of the Wands Ceremony and the Photo Shoot. Harry would have preferred if he could have omitted the last, but at least he didn't ask for an autograph on the way up. Colin led him to the Trophy Room, where the other three Champions, the Judges (including Daphne,) Rita Skeeter and a photographer were waiting. Curly hair dyed blond, blue eyes accompanied by hideous glasses, Skeeter seemed to take inordinate pleasure in photographing them as a group and then taking a ridiculous number of individual shots, focusing the most on Fleur (she was beautiful, after all) and Harry (he was controversial). Harry put up with it and resisted the urge to Transfigure Skeeter into a small rodent and then step on her.

When they were finally finished they waited for Mr. Olivander to show up so that they could proceed with the Weighing of the Wands, a ceremonial event that included far more pomp and circumstance than was necessary; the point was to make sure one of the Champions wouldn't blow him or herself up with a faulty wand. That could be done in a few minutes. Rita Skeeter's bony fingers grabbed her chance by the throat. "Would you mind answering a few questions, Harry?" she asked in a poisonously sweet voice.

Harry gave her a small smile and flicked his wrist, launching his wand into his right hand. She backpedaled, expecting him to attack, but he merely ripped the acid-green Quik-Quotes Quill from her hand, hurling it to the floor. Then he crushed it under his trainer, green ink spewing forth like blood from a dying animal. Casually, he produced a quill from his robes along with a bottle of ink. He returned his wand to its holster. "Now, I don't mind."

He heard Cedric's laugh from behind him. Daphne, standing across the room behind Skeeter, was also grinning evilly. Skeeter clenched her teeth and took the offered items. "Don't try to charm that, either. I nicked it from my exams last year. It's resistant to magic."

Skeeter growled softly and pulled out a piece of paper. She'd clearly underestimated him, and he'd made her pay by humiliating her. Her

blood was probably boiling behind that practiced smile. "So," she began. "How do you respond to accusations that you cheated your way into this Tournament?"

"I don't," Harry replied flatly. He debated what to say next. He sighed inwardly; it was worth a try. "I didn't enter myself, but I plan to take advantage of the opportunity."

"Harry, do you really expect our readers to believe that?" Rita asked, her own skepticism blatantly obvious.

"No," Harry replied truthfully. "But that's not my problem."

Rita seemed thrown off by his responses. She'd probably expected anger, frustration, or, in her dreams, an admission of guilt. Instead, she'd gotten an emotionless matter-of-fact response. "Very well...are you frightened at all by the prospect of competing? This tournament was designed for Seventh Years, not students as young as yourself? What do you think that your parents would think about you competing?"

"That was a lot of questions," Harry observed dryly. "I'm not intimidated by the Tournament. I'm confident in my own abilities and believe that I'll at least get through it in one piece. As for winning, I'll do my best, but I'm managing my expectations." *Chew on the underdog story, Skeeter, and get out of my face*, he thought angrily. But like Skeeter, his facial expression belied his true emotions.

"What about your parents, Harry? Would they be proud? Frightened? Angry?" Skeeter asked.

Harry stared her right in the eyes. "Truth be told, Rita, I can't be certain of what they would think. They're *dead*. But my guardian believes in me, and believes in what I am doing. That's what matters to me." He tried to keep all emotion out of his voice, anything that might give the glorified gossip columnist the impression that she'd gotten to him. But at the same time, he had an image that he wanted to cultivate, and that was of a determined competitor. Anything that could be construed as breaking down was not going to help him to that end.

“Harry, you must understand that our readers want to know more about you,” Skeeter said, trying, and miserably failing, to sound encouraging and sympathetic. “You are an underdog, a boy among men, and there’s controversy surrounding you. If there is a message that you want them to receive, I can do that for you.”

Harry was intrigued by her change of tactics. Clearly, she’d hoped to overwhelm him, isolate him, and use her Quik-Quotes Quill to twist his words into some tearjerker of a story. That had gone wrong from the instant that she’d shown she wasn’t going to be an honest journalist. So now, she was trying something else, something he hadn’t seen or expected. He made eye contact with his guardian for a split second, trying to tell her that he had the situation under control. Skeeter only attacked those who could not retaliate. Daphne’s contempt for her was such that Harry doubted she’d resist inflicting a significant amount of pain on Skeeter if she had the slightest provocation. Rita had to know that, too.

“I think that my background is a matter of public record,” Harry said bluntly. “There’s very little that I can or have a desire to tell you that isn’t already common knowledge.”

Rita jotted something down, though he couldn’t imagine what it could possibly be. “So, if I understand you correctly, you are denying that you entered this Tournament, and you can’t offer an explanation to the contrary?”

Harry nodded. It wasn’t what she wanted. She was still hoping for some thoughtless outburst that she could use. Harry wasn’t going to give her that. “I don’t know who put my name in the Goblet of Fire. Considering the amount of danger involved in competing, I’m guessing they aren’t that fond of me.”

“What about your friends, your guardian, or your teachers? Might they have wanted to challenge you?”

Harry’s eyes hardened, but his voice was as dead and monotone as it had been throughout the interview. “I’m not going to justify that with a response. It’s baseless conjecture at best, and an attempt at provocation at its worst. You’re not getting anything useful out of me, Skeeter, and I suggest that you stop trying.”

“Are you threatening me?” she asked, sounding shocked. She could act, that Harry would give her.

“It’s not a threat, at least not from me. It’s professional advice. Your time is best spent elsewhere. This interview is over.” With that, Harry turned and began to walk away.

“You think you won, don’t you?” she said nastily. “You’re wrong. I can *destroy* you, Potter.”

Harry turned and gave her an amused look. “What will you do, Rita? Interview the Gryffindors? Find out what they think about me? I can save you the time. The words you’ll hear until your ears bleed are: *manipulative, Dark, traitor, arse, sellout, fake, arrogant, evil, dangerous, unstable*, and, of course, *Slytherin*. That’s probably plenty to write an article that turns half the Wizarding World against me, or perhaps make them pity me, instead directing their ire at Daphne Dressler for corrupting The Boy Who Lived.” Harry’s voice was hard and biting, his eyes narrow slits. “Fortunately for me, the people whose opinion I care about use your columns as tinder. Try to destroy me, Rita. Write the most invective piece of journalism that you’ve ever created. What you’ll discover is that I don’t care about what others think of my motives. I care about what they think of my actions.”

“You sound pretty confident, Potter,” Rita observed. “A bit more than you should be? You expect to run over the field?”

“I never said that, Skeeter,” Harry replied. “I’ve lived three years at Hogwarts with most of the student population either actively distrusting me or doubting my integrity. It’s nothing new. Howlers make fires more colorful.”

Harry was taking a risk, a big one. But this was something that he was going to have to confront sooner or later. Skeeter would have tried to make him look bad regardless, because that was what sold papers. He’d read her article about the speculation surrounding his injuries during his Second Year. But he was confident that she would back down, especially if he gave her a reason. “Of course, I’m not closed to negotiating with you, Skeeter. I’d rather you didn’t try to make me into a pariah. But it won’t...”

Suddenly, something that had been bothering him clicked into place. Something was *off* about Skeeter's aura, which was surprisingly strong. Now he knew why. The feeling he felt was almost like a foreign presence that was hidden by her own magical signature. He'd felt it before, in the presence of two specific individuals. Those two were Minerva McGonagall and Sirius Black. He hadn't made the connection before now. The question, of course, was whether to let her know that he was on to her. He'd be revealing the ace up his sleeve, but the leverage that he would have would give him a crucial edge. That, combined with Daphne's presence and reputation, one that she *certainly* didn't care about, even appreciated because it worked to her advantage, he'd be able to neutralize this gnat before she could bite him. "I'm sure it must be convenient to be able to get inside information, Rita? Could you actually be the proverbial 'fly on the wall?'"

Rita looked shaken for a moment. "What are you talking about?"

"You know *exactly* what I'm talking about, Skeeter. Now, you and I are going to make a deal. After each Task, I'll give you an exclusive interview. You will take notes like a normal journalist. I promise that I'll give you interesting material to work with. Do with it what you wish. But unless you want me to file a report with the Ministry, or have Daphne expose you in the middle of the press box, you'll stay away from the other students, give equal coverage to the other Champions, and at least make an attempt to cut back on the embellishment. It's not as though I'm the only interesting story here. This could be Krum trying to redeem himself after losing the World Cup. Fleur attempting to overcome a stereotype about Beauxbatons students being *soft*. And Cedric attempting to win glory for a House that doesn't get much. I think that with your award-winning skills you could more than satisfy your publishers. And yes, you can write about Harry Potter, the grown-up Boy Who Lived, the underdog of the Tournament. You can even hint that I cheated to get in; it's not as though it will blow many people away. But you'll stay away from my family, living and dead, and you'll stay away from my classmates. Am I understood?"

It had to be *killing* Skeeter, who had popped the balloon of many an "untouchable" politician, to be taking orders from a fourteen-year old. But she wasn't stupid. She nodded, though she glared daggers at him.

“I think the Weighing of the Wands is about to begin, Potter. They’ll need you for that.”

Harry took the unspoken advice and departed, leaving Skeeter fuming behind him. He grinned from ear to ear. He’d been planning that, running scenarios over and over again in his head. He hadn’t anticipated having the equivalent of a Hungarian Horntail hanging over the woman’s head, and he’d exceeded all of his expectations. That said, he’d probably been lucky, and could afford to become overconfident and complacent. Without his knowledge that she was an unregistered Animagus, his entire plan might have backfired.

But for now, he could enjoy his victory. Daphne, he knew, would approve.

His guardian gave him a satisfied smile as he entered the room where Mr. Olivander was now standing, holding Fleur Delacour’s wand. As he entered, the wizened shopkeeper cast a spell that caused a bouquet of flowers to appear, and pronounced her wand perfectly functional. Daphne walked over to him, even as Skeeter, her composure restored, silently moved to take her place next to the wall, her back-up Quik-Quotes Quill held tightly in her fingers. “Whatever you did, Harry, worked beautifully. I’ve never seen her look this anxious. Her entire body is rigid, her movements are stiff. She’s furious.”

“She’s also an unregistered Animagus,” Harry whispered. “That helped my cause a bit. I promised to give her an exclusive interview following each task, and gave her some advice for the rest of her pieces on the Tournament.” His guardian’s look told him an awful lot. “I know. I got lucky.”

“You’re also brilliant, Harry, and you’ve become more manipulative than I could have ever dreamed,” she said, smiling proudly. Rita was deliberately focusing on Krum, who stood uncomfortably in front of Ollivander as he fussed over his foreign-made wand. “Be careful, but build off of this. Skeeter is, if anything, predictable. She cares for no one but herself, and she’ll do what you told her to do.”

“But what’s to stop her from registering and making it a non-issue?” Harry asked.

“The fact that my best friend is the personal secretary of Amelia Bones, the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement,” Daphne said. “Amelia has to approve any request for an Animagus license. Skeeter knows that. And if Andi gets a whiff of it, I’ll expose her as soon as I get the opportunity. You’re on,” she added.

Harry walked over to Mr. Olivander, flicking his wrist to draw his wand. The man’s eyes widened. “Ahhh, a custom wand holster. I don’t sell them myself, but I know the ones that the Aurors purchase are of excellent quality. Now, Mr. Potter, your wand...yes, I remember this one. Holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple.” Harry appreciated that he didn’t mention the *other* interesting detail about his wand. That not only did he know the phoenix that had molted the feather that formed the core of his wand, but that one of Fawkes’s feathers also formed the core of Lord Voldemort’s wand.

Harry watched as the wand-maker waved his wand around and then sent a stream of wine out the end. As he expected, there was nothing wrong.

Before he left, he gave Rita Skeeter a purposeful look.

I’m watching you.

It was actually the first time that Harry had gone into the village of Hogsmeade. Forbidden from doing so by Dumbledore with Sirius Black on the loose, he’d spent most of the time with Lupin. Now, with the werewolf eking out a quiet existence as he awaited instruction from Dumbledore, there was nothing stopping Harry from exploring the old WIZARDING village.

He, Ginny, and Hermione made their way along the half-mile long path that led down to Hogsmeade, accompanied by the majority of the students above Second Year, and several groups of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students who had also been invited to enjoy what the town had to offer. In mid-November, the cold weather had settled in and both girls wore hats. Harry had declined to do the same and his ears were protesting painfully even as he tucked his hands into his robes to keep them warm. Hermione and Ginny favored blue jeans, but Harry had been raised wearing wizarding clothing and his preference for robes overrode their inconvenient bulkiness. At least it

could be said that they were warm. The ones he wore now were a dark blue. "So what are we planning to do today?" Harry asked.

"Well, you've never seen the village, so..."

"Daphne took me here the first time that I came to Hogwarts," Harry corrected. "But I don't exactly know my way around. What do you two normally do?"

"We spend roughly the same amount of time at the Quidditch supplies store and the bookstore, and then get a butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks," Ginny replied. "Then, on the way home, we stop at Honeyduke's Sweetshop. I think Zonko's has opened a branch here, so I think that's worth checking out."

Harry smiled. "At least we'll know where to find the twins."

Hogsmeade was, of course, a place where grown wizards worked and lived, but Harry guessed that the students provided a significant portion of the local economy. The town itself was small, with most of the commercial venues located on one street, with homes and smaller businesses on side streets. The mob of students that now swarmed the streets at least doubled the local population. Harry, Hermione, and Ginny made their way into Maywood's, which sold both used and new books. The interior of the building was considerably larger than the exterior, something relatively common to magical stores because the owners weren't charged additional rent for changing the dimensions.

It soon became clear that Harry and Hermione were considerably more interested in spending time browsing in Maywood's than Ginny was. Ginny was a good student, and she liked to learn, but she really wasn't as academic in nature as Harry was, and certainly not as much of a bookworm as Hermione. She politely waited as Harry and Hermione pulled title after title out to examine them. Harry was looking for books on three subjects: 20th Century Magical History, anything at all on Goblins, Dragons (to see if there was anything he didn't know that he should), and dueling techniques. The Hogwarts Library had an excellent reference series on Dueling Spells that he used often. Harry also checked the *Daily Prophet* to make sure that Skeeter hadn't gone back on her word. She hadn't.

Of his two best friends, Ginny had unsurprisingly been more amused by his handling of Skeeter. Hermione had been highly skeptical at first, but after he'd explained everything even she had to admit that he had completely outmaneuvered the much more experienced and crafty journalist. Both girls were familiar with her work and disliked her as much as Harry and Daphne. The day after the interview, Skeeter had written several articles, but to Harry's delight, they had uncharacteristically offered equal and positive coverage of all four champions, and while his back-story had been mentioned, it hadn't been embellished. It was a fine piece of journalism, but it was far too docile for a woman who was drawn to controversy like a starving dog to a slab of fresh meat.

Harry was reading the biography of the author of a promising book about the history of Goblins when Ginny finally spoke up. "Harry," she said. He turned to face her. She looked somewhat anxious. "I don't mean to be offensive, but I'm not really having much fun here. Do you mind if I just go ahead to the Quidditch Supplies Store while you two finish up in here?"

Harry blinked. "No, of course not. We'll meet up with you over there."

Ginny nodded and ran off. Harry continued browsing. Reliable, relatively unbiased works on Goblins were indeed difficult to find. Nor were they likely to be written by someone that had been employed by the Ministry during a time that several unfair laws had been passed to limit the financial freedom of the Goblins. Disappointed, Harry returned the volume to the shelf.

Ginny Weasley waded, more than walked, through the rapidly shifting crowds that filled the streets of Hogsmeade Village. Small in stature, Ginny was at a decided disadvantage and felt like a small child lost in a crowd. Fortunately, she wasn't so diminutive that she couldn't see where she was going. She finally managed to reach the Quidditch Supplies Store when a large black shape caught her eye.

She glanced over into an empty alley and saw a large black dog. She liked animals, especially dogs and cats, and had since she was a child. This dog beckoned to her with large, shining eyes and a lolling pink tongue. She approached, cautiously, aware that this was

probably a stray. But while he was a bit thin, he didn't look extremely mal-nourished. Or maybe it was just the thick coat of fur that covered him. Either way, he was adorable, and utterly irresistible to her. She extended a hand and touched the dog's head. When he didn't resist, she started stroking the top of his head, scratching behind his ears. The dog licked her hand. She laughed. "I should show you to my friends," she said, despite the fact that she knew the animal couldn't possibly understand her. "I think Harry likes dogs."

But at the sound of her friend's name, the dog became extremely excited. And that was when Ginny made the connection. *Black dog. Harry. Sirius Black.*

Last year, that sequence of thoughts would have caused her to scream and run for help. But now, she knew that Black was, although not Harry or Daphne's favorite person in the world, on the right side. He'd been falsely imprisoned, and escaped the previous year. She didn't have the full story of what had taken place between Harry, his guardian, and his Godfather, but she knew that Black's appearance here, in his animagus form, was no accident. *For Merlin's sake, he's waiting by the Quidditch Store! What else could he possibly want? He also recognized me.*

"You want to see Harry, don't you?" she asked. The dog gave a very human nod. "Alright, he's back at the bookstore. Stay here, Sirius, and I'll get him," she whispered. The dog gave her a smile upon hearing his human name, then nodded in understanding. He lay down on the street and she hurried back to the bookstore.

She burst in the door, nearly knocking over Hermione, who was standing in the check-out line with a large stack of books. "Where's Harry?" she asked, trying to find her composure. She was drawing far too much attention.

"Back in the magical creatures section," Hermione replied. "What-"

Ginny was already making her way over to her friend. "Harry," she whispered. He turned to face her.

"Ginny?"

"There's someone that wants to see you," she explained. "Over at the Quidditch Supplies Store, I found this wonderful dog..."

Harry's eyes widened in understanding. Then he shook his head. "C'mon, I'll come back for this stuff later. *Bloody idiot*," he growled under his breath. She and Harry made their way to the front of the store, where Harry ran up to Hermione and whispered something in her ear. She nodded in understanding, and Ginny had to run to keep up with Harry as he determinedly made his way through the crowd toward the store. They reached the alley and Harry threw a glare at the dog, which was rushing over to greet him. "Not here," he hissed. The dog nodded and looked over his shoulder, then started trotting away from them. Then, Padfoot stopped and looked at them. Harry sighed and began to trail the large canine, followed by Ginny.

A/N: Another rather uneventful but hopefully somewhat illuminating chapter. More is going to happen in the next one, and then after that is a short chapter detailing the events of the first task.

On that note, I'd like to make something clear. I personally felt that the Tasks of the Triwizard Tournament were ridiculously easy. Or, at least the way the Champions probably could have done them in their sleep was ridiculous. Yes, I know that they were supposed to make the thing safer, but how many times have we heard that? Expect the champions to get beat up quite a bit more, and to suffer more overall. It can't be that easy to get around a friggin' dragon.

Harry's conversation with Daphne had a number of purposes. First, it gave Harry an idea of the monumental odds that he faces. Voldemort has a huge advantage because he can appeal to the downtrodden, suppressed magical races that wizardkind has treated as second-class citizens. Their bigotry and arrogance has come back to bit them in a huge way. Also, if you notice at the end, he's trying to figure out a way to start building a force of people he can trust that are capable of fighting. Sound like anything from canon that we know?

I thought it was also time for Harry to win a kind of victory, to boost his confidence, because he's going to need it. I despise Skeeter's character, but she's useful in her own way, so I thought that Harry

throwing a leash around her neck from the get-go would be fun. It was a bit of a gamble for him, but, hey, it worked.

Harry's going to get to know all of the champions better. There is a lot of common ground between Harry and Krum, as you saw in the interaction between them. I'm also trying to make him more human and less mythical. He's a kid, for all intents and purposes. To use a baseball analogy, even Dwight Gooden had his bad days as a teenager pitching at the major league level.

Yeah, there's a confrontation between Harry and Sirius coming. I thought it was about time for it.

Something else is coming next chapter, a secret being revealed that will make Harry seriously reconsider one of his relationships.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter 11: Secrets and Lies

Harry and Ginny followed Padfoot out of Hogsmeade and up a short mountain path into a cave. As soon as they were inside, Harry crossed his arms over his chest, his expression decidedly irritated. "Alright, Sirius, you stuck your neck out to get me here, let's get over with this."

In a matter of seconds the shaggy black dog morphed into an unkempt, malnourished, and tired-looking man. He barely looked human, dressed in the rags that might have come from his prisoner's garb, his eyes cold and dark, even as his expression was considerably more amicable. "Nice to see you again too, Harry," Sirius Black replied. Ginny was still staring at him, trying to suppress the urge to run in terror. She'd been told that Sirius Black was a traitorous murderer for years, and now he stood in front of her, harmless as can be, a pitiful, gaunt figure. "And you too, although I'm not sure I remember your name," he said to the redhead.

"Ginny," she supplied. "You've been living up here?" she asked, gesturing at their surroundings. Ginny had noticed the old newspapers, a thin cloth that might have served as a bed, and bones of small animals scattered about. Harry glanced at their surroundings.

Sirius nodded, sitting down on the blanket. "It's not the most comfortable of dwellings, but it's not Azkaban."

"But that's exactly where you'll be going if someone sees you and figures out who you are," Harry said. "The Ministry knows that you are an Animagus, Sirius. Daphne told them, back when she thought you were trying to kidnap me." Harry's tone was angry, although Ginny couldn't determine if he was angry at Sirius for putting himself in jeopardy or angry with Sirius for another reason. The man *had* tried to kidnap him...

"How considerate of her," Sirius replied sarcastically. "How is the Grey Maiden, Harry?"

"She's actually staying here," Harry said. "She's decided she wants to be close in case of trouble. I'm sure you've heard about the Tournament. And she's been helping me to prepare."

Ginny watched Godfather and Godson, feeling distinctly out of place and confused by the tone of the conversation. There was a definite tension here, possibly even hostility. She'd never heard the full story of what had happened that night, a night that she'd done her best to forget between the Cruciatus curse...and what she had witnessed Daphne do to her tormentor *after* she'd rescued her...

Ginny shivered slightly even though the cave was surprisingly warm. But she found herself wanting to know more, to understand what she had missed after Daphne had left her, to understand on what terms the two had parted on and what they thought of one another.

"Well, at least she's doing that," Sirius replied. "Whatever her faults, that woman knows her stuff. She was a damned good Auror, and she'd make a fine instructor. That doesn't mean she makes a good surrogate mother."

"We disagree on that issue, that much is certain," Harry replied. "She's taken care of me, Sirius, and she probably kept me from having to grow up with my Muggle relatives. Putting aside the fact that they aren't the most wonderful people in the world, I'd be bloody screwed if I hadn't been brought up a wizard. I have enough left to do and learn as it is."

"Ah, yes. Your *destiny*."

"Black," Harry said, speaking the man's surname with disdain, "I don't need your approval, and truth be told, I really don't *want* it. Choose to ignore it if you wish, but you of all people should understand the danger that we face. The Darkness is coming, and even if you disapprove of the methods used to reach that conclusion by Daphne and others, it doesn't make those conclusions any less valid. Voldemort reached out to me this summer, in my dreams."

Sirius's eyes widened. "*What?*"

"I've since learned to block him, at least from a distance," Harry said. "Professor Snape has been instructing me, and instructing me well."

"*Snape*," Sirius spat the name like a profanity. "Merlin knows what he does while he squirms around in your head."

"He's taught me something that no one else could," Harry replied. "Daphne wasn't comfortable doing it, and Dumbledore doesn't have the cruelty required to show me my worst memories."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Sirius observed.

"Voldemort isn't going to have any such inhibitions. It's better that I learn to deal with them now, in a safe environment, than when my life is in imminent danger."

Sirius could argue with that, Ginny saw. He simply closed his eyes and whacked his fist lightly on the dirt floor. "Damnit, Harry, I just wish you'd give me a chance. I know that we didn't exactly meet on the best of terms, and I know that I've done some terrible things to you, but I swear on your parents' grave that I had nothing but the best intentions for you. You are more than just a student to me, Harry. You're my Godson, and I want to protect you, protect your innocence. Let those that have already lost it worry about Voldemort."

Harry's response came in a hushed whisper, and Ginny had to strain to hear it. *"I would, Sirius, if I had a choice. But the problem is that without my help, Voldemort will win. And I'm not ready to help them yet."*

Ginny remembered the basics of the Prophecy that she and Hermione had finally forced out of him the previous year. He couldn't remember the actual text, as Daphne had placed a block on his mind to protect that information from others, but he'd basically explained to them that he had a critical role to play in the coming war, and that Voldemort wanted him dead. That he held the key to defeating the Dark Lord.

"I don't believe that," Sirius retorted. "Daphne will say anything to make you go along with her, Harry, believe me. She's as cunning and manipulative a Ravenclaw as I've ever met. At least, before, her heart was in the right place. Now...I just don't know."

"Daphne didn't tell me that, Sirius, Dumbledore did," Harry replied. "Unless you want to accuse him of the same things, then I suggest you accept the reality of my situation and allow my training to continue. As you said, there is no better teacher than Daphne."

“What about this entire Tournament business?”

“What about it?”

“Well, I’m going to make an optimistic leap and assume that you didn’t enter yourself,” Sirius said. “So how is it that you’ve become the youngest Champion in Tournament history?”

“I didn’t enter myself. Daphne forbade me.” Ginny noted that Harry didn’t tell Sirius that he hadn’t been considering it. She’d gotten the impression that he’d never really given it serious consideration, and that Daphne’s command had basically killed any possibility that might have existed.

“Good for her. At least she has some sanity left in her.”

Harry eyes blazed. “Some thing, coming from a man like you. Imprisoned in Azkaban for over a decade, so obsessed with *rescuing* you beloved Godson that you knock him unconscious and then use an Unforgivable on him to make him come with you. So desperate to stay close to him that you moved into a cave, neglecting your own health to the point where you are skin and bones, living off of rats and garbage, following the news through week-old copies of the *Daily Prophet*. So unthinkingly loyal that you walk right into Hogsmeade, knowing or at least suspecting that the Ministry knows that you are an Animagus, walking right up to a girl that you think you remember as being my friend. God, Sirius, I’m not sure what *insane* is if it isn’t *that*.”

Sirius’s eyes never left his, and his expression remained set and determined. “Are you quite finished?” Harry nodded harshly. “Well, I suppose that you do have a point. And I *might* be a bit messed up after spending so much time in the company of those dreadful Dementors, obsessing about my own innocence to prevent myself from losing it. But how does that make my devotion to you and my concern for your well-being any less genuine?”

“I suppose it doesn’t. But neither do Daphne’s actions,” Harry said. “Going by those standards, I’d say that you’re both completely mad.”

“So then why don’t you go to the only one of us that *is* still sane, go to Remus?” Sirius urged.

“Because I love my guardian,” Harry said. “And I won’t betray her like that. It would kill her, and I’m not prepared to abandon her to her own demons.”

“It’s not *betrayal*, Harry,” Sirius insisted. “It’s for your own good. She’ll see that, in time. But you aren’t safe with her.”

“Black,” Harry said, reverting to his surname. “Every time that Daphne has done anything to hurt me, there have been, shall we say, extenuating circumstances. I can’t say the same for your actions.”

“Bloody hell, Harry, how’s *that* possible?” Sirius demanded. “You were bloody well set on *killing* me because you thought I’d betrayed your parents and the Order, and you *definitely* weren’t going to agree to come with me willingly before Remus got into the Shack. I didn’t have a choice in either situation. I just hoped that I could get you to see the light once I’d gotten you away from there.”

Harry gritted his teeth, and Ginny could see that, try as he might, he couldn’t deny any of that. It should have frightened her that her friend had been set on killing another person, a grown man, but she wasn’t sure she would have felt any different if she had been orphaned and discovered who was to blame. “You still went about it the wrong way. You could have contacted Dumbledore, asked for an audience. He would have found out that you were telling the truth, and we could have gone about this whole thing in a far more civilized manner.”

Sirius nodded. “Yes, I suppose that I could have done that. But Harry, you must understand...I knew that I was, technically, not guilty of the crimes for which I was committed. Those were the murders of Pettigrew and the Muggles. But of the others...Harry, I hold myself personally responsible for what happened to you parents, and to a lesser extent what happened to all of the Order members that died after he betrayed them, including Edmond Dressler. The Secret Keeper switch was James’s idea, but Lily wasn’t convinced. I fought for it, thinking that they’d be in less danger if the secret was held by a less obvious individual. Instead, I delivered them straight into

Voldemort's hands. And for that, I am truly sorry and ashamed. And that's why I couldn't go to Dumbledore."

"You felt that by *rescuing* me, you would somehow absolve yourself? That by taking me from my lawful and loving guardian, you would somehow be finding redemption? That's twisted, Sirius, and you know it."

"I know," he admitted. "I just...Harry, I don't know if I made the right decisions. My intentions were only the best, but my actions were not properly considered and probably did more harm than good. I certainly didn't make you any more apt to trust me by the time I finally got you alone in the Shack."

Harry nodded, agreeing with that assessment. "So then where do we go from here? Ginny and I need to get back soon; we're supposed to be leaving Hogsmeade right now to be back for Dinner." Ginny glanced out of the entrance of the cave and saw that the sun was indeed setting, a halo of fiery orange fighting through the grey clouds on the western horizon.

"I just want you to promise me that you'll be careful, and that you won't blindly accept everything that Daphne tells you. I believe she means well, Harry; in fact, I'll trust that she does because I have no other choice. The alternative is far too terrible to imagine. Just...think for yourself, alright? Watch your back. And try to get into contact with Remus. He enjoyed spending time with you, and I think he misses that."

"I'll do that," Harry promised. Ginny sensed the thick tension beginning to fade away, replaced by a feeling of mutual understanding. "The same goes for you. Don't do anything stupid and get yourself arrested. I'll try to visit during each Hogsmeade weekend. But don't approach the castle, and don't go looking for me. If I want to talk to you, I'll come here."

"Alright, I can do that. Good luck in the First Task. Any idea what it is, yet?"

"No," Harry lied, his expression revealing nothing. Ginny resisted the urge to object, knowing that Harry had concealed the truth for a reason.

As the two of them calmly walked down the mountain pass back toward the village, Ginny finally asked the question. "Why didn't you tell him about the dragons?"

Harry sighed. "Because it wouldn't have done any good. I've already figured out a plan, one that makes use of my strengths, and telling him what I was up against would only cause him to worry, tempt him to come out of hiding to watch me, to protect me even though he's powerless to. I...I'm not that fond of him, Ginny, but I don't want to see him hurt or back in Azkaban."

"He cares about you, Harry," she told him. "He loves you. You can see it in his eyes."

Harry ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I know. I just don't know what to tell him. I don't trust his judgment, and I don't trust his motives. They may sound altruistic, but he has a personal agenda as well. He thinks that I was raised poorly, and somehow wants to correct that, even though it isn't possible. He thinks that Daphne is the next thing to a Dark Witch."

"You know, Harry, he does have a bit of a point," she said, swallowing some of her fear.

Harry stopped dead in his tracks and met her eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Well," Ginny said, suddenly feeling very, very anxious. She had a feeling that Harry would not appreciate hearing the truth, so she decided to lighten the blow. "From what I've seen and heard, she's done some things...some bad things."

Harry shook his head and continued walking. "Perhaps, Ginny, but we all make mistakes. She's learned from them. I know she has."

At that moment, it became painfully obvious to Ginny that whatever doubts Harry might have had about his guardian's mental state during

her first year were gone, buried by Harry's subconscious. He didn't want to believe them, wanted to believe that he could trust his guardian. Ginny could understand the feeling, even as she despaired over the result. She wasn't sure she was ever going to be able to tell him what she had witnessed that terrible spring night in the Forbidden Forest, when she'd caught a glimpse of Hell itself.

"Legilimens!"

Snape's harsh bark signaled the beginning of yet another mental assault; the mental presence of the Potions Master struck the first barriers in Harry's mind. But as he'd planned in the hours previous to the beginning of the lesson, he allowed those walls to crumble. He let his own mental presence reach out, brushing against that of the foreign intruder. That presence began to chase his, searching for the most painful memories it could find. Harry led it deeper, and as he did so, he shoved the secrets he sought to protect into the deepest corners of his mind, not unlike a child kicking incriminating evidence under a bed when his parents entered the room. Deeper, further down, until...he struck.

From nowhere, Harry unleashed his stored reserves, blasting the intruder with waves of raw power; saw rays of white light bombard the blackened presence in his mind's eye. The other presence drew back, and Harry attacked again, harder this time, trying to encircle it, to trap it deep within the confines of his own mind. And as he did so, he brushed against the thoughts of his opposite number...and felt himself sucked the other way, clinging to the presence even as it pulled out of Harry's mind and back into its own. There was a flash of light, and then...

Around him, familiar surroundings began to take shape. The colors were washed out, weak, and he immediately realized that he was in a very old memory of some sort. He tried desperately to remember how he'd reached this point, but it did not come to him. He stared around at the environment around him. He recognized the damp, dark stones of the Hogwarts dungeons, could almost smell the mildew and mold that permeated the place, despite Argus Filch's best efforts. The only light was that provided by the torches that hung in brackets attached

to the walls, flickering silently and casting strange shadows on the walls.

Suddenly, Harry heard a groan. He spun around, but made no sounds. He hadn't been present when this memory had been made. He was merely an observer, unable to interact with the others present or his environment. It was a helpless feeling, although it carried with it the knowledge that he was entirely safe, as it meant that those around him could not harm him either.

The source of the groan was a hunched, staggering figure. He was deathly pale, with a gaunt, malnourished appearance and a face dominated by a hooked nose. Bloodshot black eyes peered out behind a curtain of long, greasy hair. It was unmistakably Severus Snape. How and why Harry had entered one of Snape's memories was unknown, but his curiosity was peaked. Snape was obviously intoxicated, and he retched, his body shaking.

Then, Harry heard voices. Two female voices, one of which was hauntingly familiar. The other of which was one he was both intimately familiar with and yet was strangely unknown to him. Lily and Daphne.

"...I can't believe that Filch expects me to serve my detention in the middle of the night down in this dreadful place," Lily was saying. "You really should be here, you know."

"I'm not letting you roam around here alone," Daphne told her. "This place gives me the creeps too. I can make my way back, and at least I know that Filch is with you."

"What if you run into Mrs. Norris?" Lily asked.

"Then I'll improvise. Say, hang her from one of the chandeliers with a Silencing Spell on her to keep her quiet. She's just a cat, even if she might be part-Kneazle."

Harry glanced back at the wasted wizard that had eventually become his Potions Professor, and saw a frightening, crazed look in his eyes. He saw something he never thought that he'd see. He saw lust.

"You can leave me here, really. It's just another minute or so to the old dungeons that Filch wants me to clean. I had to dig out my crummiest clothing for this thing. I'll bet that whatever grime I get on the stuff isn't coming off with a Cleaning Charm."

"I'm not taking that bet," Daphne replied. "You know whose fault this is, of course."

"I can't believe him!" Lily exclaimed. "Not only does he pull a prank in sight of the girl he keeps asking out, but then he leaves her to take the blame. The size of the...you know what on that man!"

"Yes, very small I imagine," Daphne said in an amused voice. "Alright, I'll leave you here. Find me first thing tomorrow morning. I'll wait outside the Great Hall until you get there."

"Okay, thanks, Daph."

"Take care of yourself, Lils."

Snape had managed to pick himself up and was now waiting around the corner for the now solitary Muggle-born witch. Harry moved ahead of him, and came face-to-face with his mother. At this age (which Harry estimated was fifteen based on the silver Prefect's badge pinned to her robes), his mother had indeed been quite attractive. Somewhat petite and slender, she had flowing dark red hair and his own shining green eyes. She carried herself with pride and confidence, that of a young woman convinced in her own worth and ability, yet not pompous enough that her confidence became arrogance. It pained Harry to know that she couldn't see him, that he couldn't just run into her arms. She was dead, and Harry understood that all too well.

Suddenly, he remembered who was lurking around the corner, remembered what he'd seen in Snape's dark eyes. He cried a warning, for all the good it did.

Lily appeared shocked by the sight and state of the fifteen-year old Slytherin. "Snape?" she asked. "What are you doing here? Are you alright?"

It was a testament to his mother's character that she cared enough to open herself, to leave herself vulnerable to attack. Without warning, Snape leapt forward, grasping Lily's wrists and slamming her against the wall. She cried out in terror, her shriek echoing through the deserted catacombs. "Snape, leave me alone!" she cried again. This time he drew his wand and Silenced her. Then, as Harry looked on in horror, he ripped open the top of her robes, exposing her to her son and her apparent rapist. She cowed in terror as Snape held her wrists against the wall, leaning in close to whisper something. Lily nearly gagged from his foul breath, which probably smelled of strong alcohol. Harry just stood there, understanding at last that he was witnessing the event that had forever earned Snape Daphne's ire. He just never imagined that the man, as horrible as he be, could have raped Lily Potter.

"I've been waiting for this for a long time, Mudblood," he hissed, his words slurred, yet understandable. Lily's eyes widened in terror, and she shook violently, her mouth opening and closing but no sound coming out. Harry felt a shiver go down his spine. Rage built within him, and he wished that there was some way he could stop this, somehow to incinerate Snape by the very force of his hatred...but he could do nothing.

Fighting his lack of coordination, Snape managed to plant a brutal kiss on Lily's protesting lips. He placed one of his hands on her waist, the other at the tear in her robes. Lily hadn't stopped struggling, but Snape had done something to hold her to the wall. He suddenly yelped in pain, and drew back, blood running down his lower lip. Enraged, he struck Lily across the face, cursing.

At this pivotal instant, Harry was blinded by a flash of pure white light. It struck Snape in the side, sending him hurtling through the air. He slammed into the far wall, sliding down to the ground in a heap. Daphne appeared, her face flushed and her eyes searing with hatred. "Bastard," she hissed. She managed to break away, coming to her friend's aid. She canceled both spells, and Lily fell into her arms, sobbing and gasping for air. Daphne let her rest against the wall, then drew her wand again and advanced on Snape, who was lying nearly unconscious on the floor, grasping weakly at his surroundings.

Daphne's intent was clear as she drew her wand back. But as Harry had somehow expected, something stopped her from delivering the killing blow. "NO! Leave him!" Lily cried. "Don't do it...he's not worth it!"

Daphne spun around, shock etched in her face. "Why? He deserves it for what he tried to do to you. I'm prepared to deal with the consequences. But this scum deserves to be punished."

"Just...leave him alone...take me out of here. Leave him be," Lily said in a weak voice. She got up, legs shaking, holding her torn robes with a hand to cover herself. Daphne didn't immediately comply. In an instant, she hit him with a powerful Stinging Hex, and he cried out from the pain.

Then she turned, thrusting her wand into her robes so hard it was a miracle she didn't break it. She supported Lily as the two left. Harry followed them. Lily was still trying to regain her composure and Daphne's voice carried with it an undertone of rage. "I'll make up an excuse for Filch tomorrow. If I have to, I'll get Madam Pomfrey to tell him that you were in the Hospital Wing. She'll understand if you don't want to come forward."

Harry suddenly found himself unable to continue, knowing that he'd gone too far from the source of the memories. He hurried back, and saw Snape slowly getting up. The memory began to collapse around him, but before it did, he was fairly certain he heard Snape speak.

"What have I done?"

Abruptly, Harry snapped back into his own mind. He opened his eyes and found himself staring at Snape, who was in a similar state. The sequence of events that had led to this point abruptly became clear. Apparently, when he'd counterattacked, he'd followed Snape's presence back into his mind, and had penetrated his unprepared defenses to reach one of his worst memories.

He stared at his Potions Professor in shock. Shock, though, was quickly replaced by outrage. And then an inextinguishable hatred that told Harry to whip out his wand and blast Snape into oblivion. He resisted, barely. "You," he hissed. "You..."

“Harry,” Snape said, a strange and unfamiliar fear in his voice. “I can explain...it was a mistake, a terrible mistake that I regret...”

“*SHUT UP!*” Harry bellowed, and several jars shattered from the force of the magic behind those words. “To think that I *trusted* you, thought you might possess the smallest *sliver* of decency...” For once, Snape looked extremely reluctant to chastise him for being disrespectful. He’d never seen the man like this before.

“Harry...” he said. “Just give me a chance to explain...”

But he’d had enough. The door to the office swung open, slamming against the wall and inflicting yet more damage on the office. Snape tried to shut it, but he could not overcome Harry’s powerful wandless spell, and Harry marched out of the room, more articles exploding as he left. He needed an explanation, one that he knew he could trust. One thought echoed through his mind again and again.

Find Daphne.

Harry found Daphne where he expected to find her. He’d used the ring that Daphne had given to him to contact her, hoping that as well as indicating that he was in danger, it would also convey strong emotions. Daphne sat cross-legged at the edge of the lake, her expression pensive, her body relaxed. He sat down next to her. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he demanded.

“Tell you what, exactly?” she replied, sounding a bit confused. “There are many things that you don’t know, Harry, and most of them I hide from you for good reason.”

“About Snape. About my mother. About how he tried to *rape* her when she was fifteen bloody years old!”

Daphne’s expression of shock was quickly replaced by a look of resignation. She closed her eyes and began speaking. “How did you find out?”

"*He* was giving me an Occlumency Lesson, and I tried something new. I ended up in his mind, and saw the entire thing," Harry explained.

Daphne sighed. "I didn't tell you, Harry, because you are fourteen years old and don't need to hear about such things. I also didn't tell you because Snape's lessons are important to your training, and it's important that you trust him." She met his eyes for the first time. "I've hated him from that moment on, Harry. I've never forgiven him for that."

"Then why wasn't he expelled?" Harry demanded. "Why did he escape with nothing stronger than a Stinging Hex? I'm pretty sure that the Marauders would have hung his hide from one of the towers."

"You're right. And that, in Lily's mind, was the problem. Your mother was a wonderful woman, Harry, a woman whose compassion and understanding knew few bounds. She had a right temper, of course, but she always gave people second chances. I'm not sure exactly what she was thinking at that moment."

Harry was silent, waiting for her to continue. Daphne's voice was flat and emotionless, which was more a technique to allow Daphne to say the words without losing her composure than an indication that she didn't care that much. "She never spoke of it again after that night. She remembered it, of course, her discomfort whenever she saw Snape, much less approach him, was obvious. Snape and I were the only ones that understood, of course." Daphne sighed again. "I can't say I understand your mother's actions, Harry. I can't speak for her, because I've never been in the same position, but I'd imagined that I'd be outraged, that I'd pull myself back together and take revenge. I have no doubt that had the Marauders learned what had happened, James would have killed Snape. They hated him plenty already."

"Was that related to the incident in the Shack?" Harry asked. Remus had told him about the prank gone horribly wrong which had resulted in James having to save Snape's life.

Daphne shook her head. "No, it wasn't. That happened a few weeks earlier, and perhaps that was part of the reason that Snape had gone and gotten himself drunk. But that was just a prank. Imagine what

they might have done if they intended to inflict real harm. That's what Lily was afraid of. I don't understand why she felt sorry for Snape, especially after what he nearly did to her, but she did. To be perfectly honest, I was confused by her reaction. She seemed to recover from it remarkably quickly, yet there were lingering signs. Of course..." she trailed off.

"What?" Harry asked.

Daphne took a deep breath, and looked away. "Of course, as soon as my family was killed during the Christmas Break, I stopped focusing so much on Lily's problems and turned my attention toward my own."

Harry could have kicked himself for forgetting that Daphne's parents and brother had been killed that same year. But she didn't seem to hold it against him that he had. "I'm sorry."

"You shouldn't be," she replied. "You lost your own parents before you even had a chance to know them. That's a far greater crime in my eyes. At least I had a chance to get to know my family, to create memories that I can sometimes call upon when I feel alone."

Daphne had *never* opened up like this before. She'd always been a closed book, unwilling or unable to discuss her past with her ward. She'd told him precious little about her experiences at Hogwarts, or what his mother and father had been like. He'd learned more about their exploits in the past year from Remus than he ever had from Daphne. But now, it seemed as though a barrier had been broken. Harry moved to embrace his guardian, and she accepted. They sat there for a long time, wrapped in each other's arms, expressing the purest of all love, that that exists between mother and child. For in Harry's eyes, for all intents and purposes, that's what she was.

Eventually, they broke apart, sitting in silence on the shore of the lake. "What do you suggest I do about this?" Harry asked. "I made a bit of a mess of Snape's office on the way out," he admitted sheepishly.

"Tell no one," Daphne replied instantly. "I hate Snape, and I always will. But he's far more valuable to you and me alive than dead. Don't tell your friends, and never mention this to Sirius or Remus. I have little doubt that both men would be consumed with the desire to make

Snape pay for what he did. They loved Lily in their own way, not in the romantic sense, but she was as good a human being as ever existed. She could be short-sighted, and she had a quick and wicked temper, but her capacity for forgiveness, for compassion...well, let's just say you might not be here if it wasn't for that. Lily had always liked James...well, the good parts of his personality, and as soon as he proved to her that he'd changed, that he'd matured and grown into a responsible and caring human being, she gave him his chance, and he took advantage of it."

"I understand," Harry replied. "I'm just not sure if I'll ever be able to look Snape in the face again."

"He's changed, Harry, in his own way," Daphne told him. "He's still a right bastard, and an all-around terrible human being, but there are lines that he's decided he cannot cross. He never engaged in many of the more horrific acts that his fellow Death Eaters committed. You don't need to forgive him, but just have the ability to forget it. Let him redeem himself by giving you the skills that you need to survive."

There was something about Daphne's voice that said she wasn't entirely sure she believed her own words. But it was the right thing to say, and Daphne had been right in saying there was little to gain by killing Snape. Still, his fury had barely faded. Snape had had to gall torment him during his first year while hiding this kind of secret. He should have thrown himself at the feet of Lily Potter's son, rather than choosing to see only his father's last name and appearance. But now...he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to trust the man again. And no matter what Daphne said, it wasn't going to be so easy to forget what he'd seen earlier. That sort of thing stayed with you, embedded deep in your mind. He'd allow Snape to help him. But any affection he might have had for the man seemed to have been swept away by a torrent of horror and rage. However, he wasn't sure Daphne understood that, and he also wasn't sure if he wanted her to. Daphne had managed to overcome her reluctance to think and speak about her past by creating and maintaining an emotional distance. He was both annoyed and relieved that he wasn't capable of doing the same.

“Hermione wants me to do more practice with the Summoning Charm,” Harry told her, breaking the silence. “We learned it recently in class.”

“It can’t hurt,” Daphne said. “Even if you are correct in assuming that you have mastered it, there is no harm in confirming that notion. If you are indeed as prepared in that area as you believe, then use this remaining week to relax and unwind, and mentally prepare yourself for what you have to face. If you must, consider alternatives in case this plan fails.”

“I’m not sure there are any alternatives,” Harry admitted. “I certainly can’t fight the dragon unaided, and I’m not advanced enough in Transfiguration for that to be of any help. And we’re not allowed to bring anything with us, which eliminates the use of any kind of potion. The dragon’s hide is thick enough to withstand all but the most powerful of spells, and we’ve since eliminated those from my arsenal.”

“You are to use raw power, either by itself or by infusing a spell with it, only in the case of an emergency or as a weapon of last resort,” she reminded him. “Even if you did manage to maintain consciousness, you would be severely weakened and unable to fight back. You would also reveal the extent of your abilities, as well as your inability to efficiently harness them. We don’t want anyone else to know about either of those.”

“I understand,” Harry said. “I’ve got to grab lunch and then get to my afternoon Herbology Class. Flitwick came down with something, which is why I had this morning free and was able to have a lesson with Snape.”

“Alright, go. Report on your readiness after you practice with the girls.”

Harry nodded and departed, leaving his guardian alone, staring out across the lake, and trying not to think of what would happen if Harry’s plan were to fail.

Herbology was not Harry's favorite subject. It wasn't that his marks were poor or anything of the sort; he just didn't find it that interesting. To be sure, magical plants had a myriad of uses as potions ingredients and some could even be used independently. Many plants were far more dangerous than they appeared. But for some reason, as they moved into the more advanced material, Harry's interest in the class had waned. Really, the same could be said of most of his classes save Defense, Potions, and, to an extent, Transfiguration. Ancient Runes was occasionally interesting, but to Harry's disappointment, they seemed to spend far more time learning the language of the old Celtic wizards than learning about their history and culture. Binns's lectures had finally become so bad that even Harry struggled to stay awake, and Hermione would occasionally lose focus. For a man that loved teaching so much that he refused to stop even after his body gave out on him, Professor Binns certainly gave a remarkable impression of not caring one bit. Care of Magical Creatures consisted of tending to the horrific results of some twisted biological experiment gone wrong, the Blast-Ended Skrewts. Harry had no idea where Hagrid had gotten them, and he was certain that the half-giant hadn't bred them himself, but they didn't seem to possess a single redeeming virtue. Well, they'd be useful in battle, if they could be controlled. But their stubbornness and downright stupidity made even that a distant possibility.

Harry was currently examining his current project, a Blue Ribbon Vine that when crushed could be used as the central ingredient to a Burn Healing Potion. The thing didn't require a great deal of care, and adjusted quite nicely to the pot Harry had planted it in, growing steadily to wrap itself around a wood pole at the center. The problem was that they tended to attract a wide variety of parasites which could stunt their growth and consume the very liquid that made the plant so useful. Currently, Harry was searching the leaves and stem for signs of parasitical activity. Fortunately, he hadn't found any yet.

Professor Sprout was cycling around the room, inspecting the work of her students. For the most part, she was pleased, and took time to both compliment students and make suggestions for how to better care for their plants. When she reached Harry, she quickly looked the vine over and nodded in approval with a slightly-forced smile. She'd been like this since the day that his name had emerged from the

Goblet. Harry really couldn't blame her for being a little irritated. Hufflepuff so rarely had a chance to win glory.

Her presence also reminded him that he needed to find Cedric as quickly as possible. He'd been strangely absent recently, and Harry failed to find him in any of his usual haunts. Perhaps he was training most of the time. If Harry could find him today, he'd have a few days to work out a plan for how to deal with the dragons.

Sprout dismissed them on time, and they returned their vines to the greenhouse. It was early afternoon now, and they had a little over an hour until dinner. Harry decided to use it to seek out his fellow Hogwarts Champion. He thought of asking one of his housemates but thought better of it; they'd get suspicious and probably be more of a hindrance than a help. The Hufflepuffs were no longer outright hostile towards him, but that didn't mean that they trusted him.

Harry searched the hallways, focusing his search in the areas around the entrance to the Hufflepuff dormitory. But his search was to no avail, and with his stomach protesting, he was strongly considering giving it up. Then, finally, he saw his quarry coming down the hall, carrying a load of books from the library. He ran to meet him. "Cedric," he called. "Cedric."

The Seventh-Year stopped and frowned as Harry approached. "What is it, Potter?" he asked.

"Dragons," Harry replied. "The First Task involves taking something from a dragon. Krum and Fleur already know, so don't worry about that."

Cedric was still frowning. "Thanks...but why? Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I don't want you at a major disadvantage," Harry explained. "As far as I'm concerned, all of use surviving this bloody thing is far more important than any of us winning it. I thought your chances would be considerably better if you knew what you were up against."

"I...well, thanks," Cedric said, readjusting the books he was carrying. "Really, thank you."

"You're welcome," Harry replied with a slight smile. "Good luck."

"You as well," Cedric said, still sounding a bit stunned.

"*Accio!*" Harry cried. For the hundredth or so time the target, in this case, a textbook, soared into the air and arced into his waiting left hand. He gave Hermione, who was standing off to the side with her arms crossed over her chest, a meaningful look. "I think it's fair to say that I've mastered the bloody Summoning Charm."

She shrugged in response. "Fine, I'll admit that," she said. She'd insisted that Harry practice the spell at least one more time before the First Task, which was now just two days away. "But I'm not convinced that being able to Summon an object that is twenty meters away and has an unobstructed flight path will be as easy as Summoning something locked in a broom closet hundreds of meters away."

Harry closed his eyes, and around them, the Room of Requirement began to change. It elongated, stretching far past the original dimensions of the room, and a plain closet door appeared out of the stone of the far wall. He smiled at Hermione, and then glanced at Ginny, who was looking around in wonderment. She never seemed to get used to the capabilities of the "Come-and-go" room, as the House-elves called it. If such a thing were indeed possible, Harry felt that he might have developed an "affinity" with the Room. It seemed to match his ideas more accurately than when Hermione attempted to change something. Perhaps it was the power he possessed; perhaps it was something different; he wasn't sure. "*Accio Broomstick!*" Harry bellowed, his wand thrust in the air. One thing that Harry had learned was that it wasn't at all necessary to actually point the wand at the object to be Summoned, if you both said its name and mentally focused on it. With a crash, the broomstick smashed through the door, leaving a remarkably clean outline, and soared through the air into his waiting hand. The broom he caught wasn't actually one capable of flight, but he couldn't imagine that it made a difference. "Is there anything else?" he asked his friends.

Ginny shook her head. "I think you're as ready as you're ever going to be, and have thought that for two days."

He turned to Hermione. "Well, that's about the most realistic test that you can stage," she admitted. "Alright, I think you're ready. You have to understand, Harry, I was only insisting that you practice because I'm worried about you. This is a dangerous competition, and I didn't want you going in there overconfident and then getting hurt."

"I know," Harry replied. "And my success here is no guarantee of my success in the First Task. Getting the broom is only half of the solution. Then I have to fly it and evade the dragon long enough to grab the egg."

"That, at least, I'm not worried about," Hermione said. "You're the best flyer in this school, Harry. That's your greatest strength."

"Do you think Krum will try the same thing?" Ginny asked. "I mean, he was going to go flying when you ran into him at the Quidditch Pitch, right? And he's the world's best Seeker, according to many accounts."

"They aren't going to be giving points for originality," Hermione reminded him. "So what if the crowd's disappointed because two people try the same thing?"

"I don't think he will, anyway," Harry said. Both girls looked surprised.

"What makes you think that?" Ginny asked.

"It's fairly simple, actually," Harry said. "Krum is known for his flying, as you pointed out. But when I spoke with him, I got the sense that he's hoping to prove that he's more than that with this Tournament. I think he wants to show that he's a powerful wizard as well as a phenomenal Quidditch player. I don't think he's Durmstrang's champion because he's a famous professional; the Goblet wouldn't care much about that. It chose him because he was the best that the school had to offer."

Ginny nodded in understanding. "Do you have any idea what technique he might use?"

Harry shook his head. "No. It's not really my place to worry about that, either. What he does in this task does not affect what I do. I've settled

on a plan, and I'm certain that with the First Task so near at hand, he has as well." He noticed that Hermione was biting her lip. When she did that, it meant she was worried about something. "What is it?"

Hermione sighed, then said, "Honestly, you *aren't* really thinking about winning this, are you? I mean, what will that accomplish?"

Ginny frowned. "Hermione, the Triwizard Tournament is one of the most legendary competitions in wizarding history. Winning it, especially at his age, would be a tremendous honor and a very noteworthy accomplishment."

"While that's true, Ginny, Hermione is right in this case," Harry replied softly. "I really don't care that much about winning. If I do, I'll enjoy it and the rewards it brings, but this Tournament isn't that important in the grand scheme of things. Merlin, it's almost a *distraction*. My priority for this event is survival. Anything else is secondary."

"I never thought you'd actually agree with me," Hermione said, sounding a bit dazed.

"I do, Hermione, because it's the right attitude, and the undeniable fact is that my survival is far more important than my winning the Tournament. I'm going to make the same promise to you that I made to Daphne," Harry said, meeting her eyes before flicking his gaze to Ginny's. "I give you my word that if an opportunity comes to win glory or achieve something that puts my life in more danger than it already is, I won't do it. I'm not going to play hero. I'm going to protect myself by limiting my actions."

Hermione smiled. "Thank you. Honestly, that makes me feel much better about this whole thing. Don't take this the wrong way, Harry, but your ambition and competitive drive makes me nervous at times. I was a bit terrified that you might be dead-set on proving yourself now, while the eyes of the wizarding world are upon you."

Harry's serious look caused Hermione's smile to rapidly fade. "Hermione, I *am* determined to prove myself. But I've come to the understanding that it will not happen here, in a competition that, for all its history, is still just a game. What I need to prove is something that I can only prove in a much greater, much more dangerous and

volatile arena.” He closed his eyes. Even if it might seem as if he’d been thinking about this for a long time, the reality was that he was discovering the truth even as he spoke the words. “I need to prove to everyone that I can fight, that I can lead, that I can make difficult decisions and easy ones. I need to prove to them that I have a chance against Voldemort, that joining me is not a death sentence. They’ll have little reason to trust a teenager who tells them he can go head to head with the most powerful Dark Wizard in centuries and win. As they say, ‘actions speak louder than words.’”

Ginny went pale. “Does that mean..?”

Harry frowned. “No, of course not. I’m not going to go after Voldemort, or even seek to fight him. I’m not ready yet; he’d tear me apart. But I need to start getting ready. I need to train, I need to learn. Because sooner or later, I will have to face him, will have to lead his enemies against him. That’s my destiny, and I don’t need to know the words of the Prophecy to understand that. And that day will come sooner than you think.”

“Then we’ll have to enjoy what time we have before it comes,” Hermione said, her voice resigned to the inevitable. As she did this, she gave Ginny a meaningful look, one that, as she’d hoped, Harry failed to pick up on.

“I guess that I should be impressed at the mess you’ve managed to entangle yourself in,” Daphne Greengrass stated plainly. “You’ve managed to provoke Malfoy and put yourself in a potentially lethal situation all at the same time. I must say that I quite look forward to seeing how you manage to pull it off.”

“I expect that your father feels the same way,” Harry replied.

“You know the answer to that question,” the fair-haired pureblood heiress replied. There was no hint of annoyance in her voice, but her choice of words made it clear that she was unhappy with the situation. “My father has a great deal of faith in you.”

“Faith that I assume you do not share,” Harry said.

"I can't pass judgment, Potter, because I've never seen the full extent of your capabilities. I am a practical person, and I believe in tangible results. Not promises, not assurances, not threats. If you give me a reason to believe in you, then perhaps I will come to see what my father sees. But if you don't, I can't see that happening."

Harry asked a question that'd been in his mind for quite some time. "What do the others think of me?" he asked. "I ask not because I am egotistical or worried, but only because I am curious and do not know."

"I'm not sure I believe that," Greengrass replied. "But your question is innocent enough, and as I'm sure you are aware, I know much of what is said and done here, especially within the walls of Slytherin House."

"Then what can you tell me?" Harry asked. He was trying not to seem desperate or worried. Truth be told, he wasn't either. At this point, it wasn't that important to gain the support of his House. He'd known for a long time that he'd have to earn that respect on his own. This was not Hufflepuff, or Gryffindor, Houses whose members were known for banding together in times of crisis. This was Slytherin, and they were best known for protecting their own interests and refusing work with others if they stood to gain nothing tangible in reward.

"I can tell you that you aren't that well liked around here," she said. Harry had expected that. "It's not so much that people hate you; most of them have come to understand that you belong in this House, regardless of your blood heritage or connections to the Light. You've definitely won some people over with your Quidditch victories, something that I have little but contempt for."

"My abilities?" Harry asked.

"No, I realize that you are quite skilled. But the hero worship that accompanies it...in all cultures, athletes are somehow lifted up upon a pedestal for doing nothing more than what one is supposed to do. It is the reasonability of every witch or wizard to develop and use their power to the best of their ability. You were born with instincts for flying that I lack. That does not mean that I should view the manifestation of those skills, the Quidditch Cup, for example, as any

test of your true worth.” Greengrass didn’t sound bitter, although she disguised her emotions so well that she might well have been. “Personally, Potter, I feel you have accomplished little worthy of praise. The fact that you have managed to survive a number of dangerous situations is negated by the fact that it was your mistakes that got you into those predicaments. I believe that one must lie in the bed that one has made, and that if you do something foolish, it is your responsibility to correct it. Relying on other to do so is a sign of weakness. There are tasks that are only fit for servants, of course. But I do not speak of preparing meals.”

“I understand,” Harry said. “Are these the thoughts of many in Slytherin?”

“To an extent, yes,” she said. “Like I said, they don’t actively dislike you because of your athletic accomplishments. It is worth noting that if they had not made certain assumptions and misjudgments in the first place, this would not have been necessary. Potter, whatever you may think of me, I gave you a chance because I have learned that it is dangerous to make blanket assumptions. I have admitted to misjudging you before, but I tried not to judge your character until I had a chance to observe you.”

“I appreciate that,” Harry said.

“You don’t need to,” Daphne replied. “Again, it’s something that I feel should be expected of any responsible witch or wizard.”

“What of my classmates?” Harry asked.

Greengrass leveled her gaze at him. “It’s a mixed bag,” she said. “Malfoy and Parkinson don’t like you, nor do his juvenile bodyguards. Bullstrode thinks very little of your ability and disapproves of your relationship with Granger. Zabini is idealistic, unusually so for a Slytherin, and thinks well of you. Davis really doesn’t care. Nott is definitely intrigued, but I’ve been unable to determine his true perception of you. In general, Potter, the older Slytherins distrust you, and the younger ones admire you. Take from that whatever you wish.”

“I appreciate this, Greengrass.”

"If you spent more time with the rest of us, you might not need me to tell you all of this," she reminded him. "But I suppose that it is wise to stick to those you know that you can trust. Both of them have their strengths and weaknesses. That they do not come from families considered acceptable by Slytherin standards means nothing to me. My family has always been...*liberal* in that sense," she explained. "If you want to know what I truly think, Potter, I believe that witches and wizards are innately superior to Muggles. But as for Muggleborns, any such judgment must be made on a case-by-case basis. Granger is a powerful and capable witch, whereas the Creeveys are weak and uncultured."

"What about Reisor?" Harry asked. "You didn't mention her."

"That's because I don't *know* what she thinks," Greengrass replied. "She's as much a mystery to me as she is to you. I don't know where she comes from, who her family is, or what she's capable of." She left it unsaid, but it was clear that those facts bothered her.

The pureblood heiress turned to go, then stopped. "I'm going to assume you've already managed to find out what is in store for you in the First Task. If you haven't, I must say that would lower my opinion of you somewhat. Are you prepared, Potter?"

"As much as I'll ever be," Harry replied.

She nodded. "Good. Because I'll be most displeased if a person that my father thinks so much of cannot survive a simple competition. It will not say much for his judgment, which I already question. Good day, Potter."

A/N: Next, I promise, is the First Task of the Triwizard Tournament. It's a short chapter for that reason, about 5,000 words. This story is moving along quite well at this point.

So, how was that for Harry's first post-SoD conversation with Sirius? The two are going to be forced to get along with each other, whether they like it or not. Sirius has always reminded me heavily of Ron, albeit a better student and more magically gifted, in the good and bad ways. His aversion to Dark Magic isn't going to go away, nor is

Harry's growing dedication to learning its secrets. Eventually, one has to choose which path they are going to follow, when they come of age. Just because Harry's devoted to toppling Voldemort does not make him a Light Wizard. Dark does not equal evil.

Snape has dark memories, period. You can tell, that if it weren't convenient to have him alive, Daphne would have killed Snape years ago. Snape is also clearly sorry for what he did. The purpose of this revelation was two fold. First, Harry was getting too close to Snape. Even though they are both Slytherins, Harry represents the "moral" side of Slytherin. Snape is about as dark (not capitalized for a reason) as it gets without joining Voldemort. He has a sliver of a conscience, a shred of decency, that separates him, as well as his loyalty to Dumbledore. But I didn't like the idea of Snape becoming a father figure. Considering who he is, that just isn't appropriate.

I'm not going to pretend I'd understand how a young woman would be feeling after a traumatic event like that. I tried to rely on Lily's character for that. It's said that many victims don't seek help, and I felt that by attributing it to Lily's compassion and a bit of her own fear, it would seem realistic.

Daphne Greengrass is a reluctant ally, and hides her emotions well, but she has a growing loyalty to Harry, one that can only be strengthened if he makes it through the year alive. Her father has taken a big risk by practically allying himself with Harry, and she's unsure how wise that was.

Yes, Harry warned Cedric this time around as well. To him, Diggory is a decent, hardworking, honest person.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter 12: Into the Fire

As the hands of the large grandfather clock located in a dingy corner of the Slytherin House Common Room struck two o'clock in the morning, much of Hogwarts was already asleep, lost in their dreams. The silence was nearly complete, broken only by the occasional pop and crackle as the fire in front of him consumed the last of the logs placed in the fireplace several hours ago.

Harry stared into the flickering flames, engrossed in his own thoughts. The day so widely anticipated had finally arrived. In just a few hours, he would face a creature that would probably not fit into the room in which he currently sat. He was not surprised that he'd been unable to sleep. He was well-rested, relatively speaking. His nightmares concerning what he'd seen in Snape's mind had not been nearly as vivid nor as frequent as what he'd feared, and the wards of Hogwarts, combined with his own developing Occlumency skills, had so far managed to keep Voldemort at bay.

No, what kept him up now was a very *normal* thing, as common to Muggles as it was to wizards. He was anxious, excited, even frightened; the same combination of emotions that any performer felt before he did something for the first time. He remembered these feelings well from the moments before his first Quidditch Match, one that hadn't ended well. Those had been less intense, but the basic human instincts that were activated in these circumstances were the same. Strangely, he was not concerned as much about the possibility that he might not survive to see the next night as he was that he might fail. As much as he'd tried to convince himself that this competition wasn't worth it, that he didn't need to win and that winning would accomplish little, he'd failed miserably. He had come to the realization about a half hour ago that he wanted *badly* to win. Perhaps it was the way that Daphne Greengrass had talked about the others not believing in him. Perhaps he wanted to prove something to his peers, he thought, but it was quite possible that he sought to win respect from another...

Himself.

Sighing, Harry blinked away the afterimage left from the bright flames and heard footsteps coming up the stairs. He didn't bother turning around.

"You should be asleep," Ginny said. She went over and sat down next to him. "I know it's difficult, Harry, but you're not going to do anyone any good if you fall asleep and fall off your broom."

"Little chance of that happening," Harry said. "I'll get an adrenaline rush as soon as I get out there, one that should get me through the whole thing. I'll pay the price tomorrow. I needed time to think, to reflect. This was as good a time as any."

"Daphne wouldn't like this," Ginny observed.

Harry shook his head. "I learned to do this *from* her. Whenever she has something stressful the next day, she never slept. I'd go to bed and see her sitting in a chair, reading, or just staring off into space."

"What a role model," Ginny said under her breath. Harry ignored her. "Hermione's going to have a fit if she finds out you aren't rested. She's worried sick about you, you know. It doesn't matter how prepared you seem, how confident you are – though based on what I'm seeing now, you weren't exactly being honest with us – you're still facing a life-and-death situation with an extraordinarily dangerous magical creature. There are so many things that could go wrong."

"Does it do any good to dwell upon them?" Harry asked, looking over at her for the first time. She wore one of her nightgowns, and her hair fell loosely over her shoulders. She was quite pretty in the flickering light of the fire, though Harry forced himself to not think about that. Now was not the time, and he wasn't sure if Ginny reciprocated his feelings anyway. There would be time to learn the truth when this was over.

"I suppose not," Ginny replied. "Actually, it's probably counterproductive. I'm going to guess that I was wrong in assuming that's what's been keeping you up."

"Yes, you were," Harry told her, trying to keep any anger out of his voice. "There are...things, things I've seen, heard. I don't really know

why I'm thinking about them know of all times." He laughed, "I suppose that maybe I'm thinking about them because I subconsciously don't want to think about everything that could possibly go wrong later."

Gently, almost with trepidation, Ginny rested her small hand on Harry's arm. He glanced at her, and she smiled. "Harry, I just want you to know, that whatever happens, no matter how bad this gets, I'll always be here for you. And I know that Hermione feels the same way."

Harry smiled back, weakly. "I know. And believe me, that knowledge might be the only thing that keeps me sane on some days. You've been great friends, and I'm sorry that I haven't...opened up to you as much as I should."

Ginny laughed, which surprised him. "Harry, believe me, even with everything you have hidden, and are still hiding from us, you're a hell of a lot more forthcoming than most boys your age. There are times when I can't get Ron to give me the time of day, let alone what's causing him to throw his textbooks around his room."

"He does that?" Harry asked, grateful for the chance to change the topic.

"Oh, does he ever," Ginny replied, giving him one of those evil sibling smiles, the one she always gave when she was about to reveal something that her brothers would much prefer stayed secret. "Ron's got a short fuse and an explosive temper. He never lashes out at anybody but himself though, which kind of worries me."

"I beg to differ."

"No, that's not the same thing," Ginny said. "Ron's problems with you are the same as the things that bother him at home. During the summer, he barely ever talks about you or Hogwarts anymore. But maybe he still thinks about them, I don't know. It's really weird, Harry. He acts all tough and aggressive, but he's terribly insecure. I don't expect you to be sympathetic, and I understand why you really wouldn't care, but I just wanted to let you know that he has plenty of problems of his own."

"I...alright...I'll try to back off of him. He's hasn't really bothered me that much of late anyway. I'm sorry, I guess I just didn't realize."

"You shouldn't be expected to read his mind," Ginny told him. "But I thought it was best that you knew that. He can be a real arse, Harry, but he's not a bad person. I'm sorry for how he treated you during your first two years here. That wasn't fair, and I'm sure that one day Ron will look back on it and realize how foolish he was. The point is that you shouldn't be worrying about him."

"I'm not," Harry protested. "You are the one that brought him up."

"And you are the one that continued the conversation," she reminded him. "It doesn't matter. You need to get some sleep, Harry. You can't rely on adrenaline for something like this. You need to be sharp."

"Alright, I'll try," Harry said, relenting. "Thank you." Without thinking about it, he reached out and wrapped his arms around his friend, as she did the same. "You're a great friend, Ginny."

"You too, Harry," she mumbled into his shoulder. They broke apart and went their separate ways. Sure enough, Harry was able to salvage several hours of sleep before he had to get up the next morning.

Harry didn't speak much at breakfast, and for the most part, everyone around him had left him alone. The school was buzzing with excitement on this cool morning in late autumn, ready to witness the First Task of the much anticipated Triwizard Tournament. Krum, Harry noticed, seemed to be in another world entirely, his movement stiff and deliberate, eating ravenously even though he didn't appear to be very hungry. He no doubt had plenty of valuable experience dealing with pressure situations. He couldn't see Fleur or Cedric to observe how they were dealing with the stress. He tried to eat as much as he could, to build up his strength. He was exceedingly grateful that Ginny had managed to convince him to try to sleep; he felt a lot more rested than he might have if he'd sat in front of the fire all night.

Once he'd eaten as much as he could stomach, he got up without a word and headed outside. He sensed that Ginny was following him,

but Hermione seemed to have decided to keep her distance. Harry appreciated that; he loved his friend, but her visible anxiety would not have done much for him on this day. He knew that Ginny had to be as much of a nervous wreck on the inside, but she did a much better job of hiding it.

Harry took a deep breath of cool morning air, trying to calm his racing heart and maintain his focus. He had a plan; he knew what he was going to do. Once he'd managed to calm himself he'd go back to his dorm and change into some more suitable robes, black and less bulky that also featured some spells to make them fire-resistant. Daphne had purchased them specifically for this occasion. He continued to sense Ginny following him, but didn't really mind. As long as she didn't say anything he didn't have to think about it. He checked his watch, and saw that he had about an hour before he was expected to report to the champions' tent for his final instructions, instructions that he already had. The only information he was missing concerned which dragon he'd be facing. He prayed it wouldn't be the Horntail. The thing was as lethal from the back as it was from the front.

"Ready?" Ginny asked, breaking the silence.

"I suppose so," Harry replied, staring out toward the Lake, which was his intended destination. They made their way down the rocky path from the castle to the large body of water. Harry stopped when they reached it, staring out over the water, his breath a small cloud in the frigid air. Ginny came up along side him. "Any particular reason you are following me?"

"I figured that you'd like company. Or if you didn't, that you should have it. I don't think it does you much good to be alone right now."

"I guess not," Harry replied. "Was this Hermione's idea?"

"No, I thought of it on my own." Ginny replied, barely hiding her annoyance at the implication she couldn't be perceptive without Hermione's assistance. Though since he'd wanted to be alone, the question had been more of a criticism of Hermione than it had been a comment about Ginny's awareness.

Harry didn't reply for a long moment, taking in the scenery before him, trying to relax and let his anxiety slip away. It worked, to an extent. "I'll be okay, Ginny. Really, I will."

"I hope so," she said. "I think you'll be okay as well. I'm not sure about Hermione, though. I think she has a bad feeling about this."

"I never had a choice not to do it, Ginny," he reminded her. "We've known this day arrive for months. Now it's here. I'm ready for it, as best as I can be."

"I'm pleased to hear that," Ginny said. "I'd be rather distressed if I heard that you were entirely unprepared and had forgotten all about it."

Harry smiled. Ginny's dry sense of humor was probably just what he needed right now. "Yeah, that would not be an ideal situation. Be rather irresponsible of me, to be honest."

"You can say that again."

Once more, there was silence between them. Harry gently took her arm and led her over to a bank where they sat down, still looking out over the water. "It's beautiful with the sun coming up and all," Ginny observed. "Do you come here often?"

"Just when I need a place to think," he replied. "It's private, at least if you pick the right times." Ginny leaned against him, and he adjusted his position to make them both more comfortable.

"I figured that I'd find the two of you down here," Hermione's voice came from behind them. Ginny quickly sat up, and Harry turned around. Hermione made her way over to join them, sitting on the other side of Harry. "That's pretty," she said. "I'm not going to bother asking if you are ready. I just wanted to make sure I had a chance to wish you good luck before you headed over to the tent. You've got about half an hour."

Harry was both irritated and grateful for that reminder. "Sorry," he told Ginny, "I need to go get ready." He got up. "I'll see both of you after

the First Task. I promise; everything is going to be alright. I *will* make it through this.”

“I know you will,” Hermione and Ginny said simultaneously. They stared at each other, and Harry sensed he was missing something. But he didn’t have time to think about it. He waved, and then made his way back up to the castle.

Harry, pleased with the fit of the robes that Daphne had gotten for him, slipped into the tent, where Krum and Fleur were already standing around. Cedric appeared several minutes later. None of them spoke. Krum was wearing a pretty form-fitting jumpsuit of some kind that appeared to be made from - or at least reinforced by - dragon hide. Ironical, Harry thought. Fleur wore simple blue robes for the sake of agility, and Cedric was, strangely enough, wearing his Hufflepuff Quidditch robes. They all stole glances at one another, but never held their gaze.

Bagman entered the tent, looking strangely bright and cheery, in sharp contrast to the others present. “Good morning, Champions,” he said in an overly dramatic voice. “Well, I’m sure you all have been anxiously awaiting the details of your first test. It’s a challenging one, I’ll grant you that. Each of you will be tasked with recovering a golden egg located in a dragon’s nest...while distracting or incapacitating a real adult nesting female dragon.” They all simply nodded, belying the fact that all four of them had known this for quite some time. Bagman pulled out a sack that appeared to be smoking. “Now, you’ll find out which dragons you are to face. Simply reach into the sack. Ladies first,” he said, gesturing to Fleur. The Beauxbatons Champion withdrew an emerald green miniature of a dragon, complete with smoke coming out of its nostrils. “Ah, the Welsh Green,” Bagman said. Cedric followed by pulling out a Chinese Fireball. That left the Swedish Short-snout and the dreaded Hungarian Horntail. Harry decided to allow Krum to go next, and to Harry’s intense relief the miniature dragon in his hands was indeed one from his neighboring country. Harry pulled out the Short-Snout. He would have preferred the Welsh Green; the Short-Snout, though it lacked the spikes of the Horntail, was more capable when it came to breathing fire, and was far more agile. That could be problematic given his current plan of

attack. But what was done was done. "You'll enter the arena in the same order," Bagman explained. Well, good luck to you all!" He winked at Harry, something that Harry missed, distracted by his analysis of the dragon he was to face.

Harry waited in the corner, studying the animated model, trying to pick out specific features of the dragon he was to face. There wasn't much of note that would really make a difference. The dragons were approximately the same size, though the Short-Snout and the Fireball were probably the most agile of the group.

The crowd noise from the stands outside began to grow. There was an unending silence between the four champions. For whatever reason, none of them seemed comfortable talking, as if it would break some unwritten rule. Harry waited, trying to calm himself, remembering the sequence of actions that he'd planned. If he executed them successfully, he'd be able to neutralize a number of advantages that the dragon had. From there, he'd figure out how to distract the dragon long enough to get past it and retrieve the egg. It was straightforward, but there were a lot of things that could go wrong, even if he managed to get the broom. If he failed in that regard, he'd need to figure out a backup plan, and fast. Daphne's warning about the dangers of using his magic to the fullest extent of his ability still rung in his ears.

Finally, as the noise outside built to a climax, he heard the muffled sounds of Bagman announcing the beginning of the First Task and describing what the Champions were expected to do in detail. Then there came a series of screams, gasps, and exclamations, caused by the entrance of the Chinese Fireball, Harry guessed. Fleur stood upright and walked to the front of the tent, taking calming breaths, and then stepped out.

For the next ten minutes, the other champions waited, listening to the muffled sounds of roars, screams, Bagman's play-by-play, cheers, and finally a thunderous applause. None of the Champions were permitted to see what they would be facing, so they had to either infer what was happening from their other senses or simply ignore it altogether. Harry was trying to take the latter approach. Whatever

happened to the others was none of his concern. His task was to stay alive and collect the egg, not to worry about the other Champions.

Cedric was next, and he looked more anxious than Harry had ever seen him look at any Quidditch game. Clearly, he was also out of his element. Harry tuned out the sounds completely this time, focusing on what he was supposed to do. It seemed to take an eternity, but finally he heard the applause and saw Krum stand up, back completely straight, eyes narrowed to slits. He walked over, leaving Harry alone, waiting his turn. He tried to listen more intently this time, but Bagman's commentary was not nearly specific enough for him to figure out exactly what Krum had tried or how successful it had been. What he did hear, though, was a chilling howl of pain and gasps from the audience, followed by Karkaroff calling for a forfeit. Krum hadn't made it. Harry hoped that he was okay, but realized that he couldn't dwell on that now. It was his turn. It took several minutes before his name was announced, and he stepped out into the blinding light, taking in the scene before him.

He stood at the entrance of a large, circular arena, the walls above him lined with stands full of screaming students. The rest of the arena was a brutal landscape of massive boulders and sharp rocks, with narrow paths cut in between them, leading to the next on the far side. Standing over that nest was a massive creature, covered in turquoise scales with splashes of dark blue on its snout, tail, and legs. It seemed to still be trying to settle in, get used to its surroundings. *Good.*

A flick of his right wrist sent his wand shooting into his hand. He raises his wand arm over his head, concentrated, and bellowed, "*Accio Nimbus!*" Bagman said something that sounded like a compliment for his audacity and daring. Harry tuned him out completely, and stood there, waiting. He realized that he was going to look very, very foolish if his broom didn't arrive in the next thirty seconds, because the dragon had heard his yell and now stared at him with malevolence. It began to move forward, away from the nest, which Harry found extremely odd. He tried to remember if Short-Snouts were more aggressive than other dragons, but no such revelation came to him. As he thought, he heard the satisfying sound of his broom hurtling through the air, gliding down over the crowd and

coming to a dead stop directly in front of him. He breathed a sigh of relief, mounted the broom, and took off, flying so that he was above the dragon. He needed to test its tendencies and reactions if this was going to work. The crowd had gotten louder when he flew into the air, but all he saw of the stands was a blur of color and screaming voices, merging together into something altogether incomprehensible.

He began to his probe of the dragon's defenses. He dove to the right, coming in as if he expected to simply fly around the dragon and grab the egg. He reversed directions as soon as the dragon moved. It flapped its wings twice but didn't actually take off, cocking its tail and stretching its head toward where he expected Harry to end up. Harry came at it again, breaking away as it lunged at him. As he went in a third time, fire erupted from its snout, and might have incinerated him and his broom if he hadn't already taken evasive action. So far, the dragon had reacted to his aggression, not been aggressive itself. But just as he thought this, it took off and flew straight at, leaving its nest altogether behind. Harry could see the rage in its reptilian eyes, the malevolence there. Something was definitely amiss. He frantically dove out of the way of two lines of fire, singeing the back of his broom on the second.

Great, so it breathes fire out of both nostrils. Exactly what I needed, Harry thought, as he swung his broom around again, trying to set up for one last try. But before he could, the dragon rose yet again: screams and shouts filling the arena as he barely got out of the way of the dragon's claws. Now hovering near the back of the stadium, he hoped that the dragon might try to drive him back further, allowing him to slip around and grab the egg. But though it continued to glare daggers at Harry, it backed off, settling back on to the ground in front of its eggs. Apparently, its desire to kill him didn't go so far as to override the instinctual protection of its young. Harry moved forward again. He'd completely blocked out the crowd now, and hadn't the slightest clue if they were thrilled by the aerial acrobatics or bored to death. He really didn't care.

Harry had an idea. He flattened himself against his broom and turned it to the right, aiming straight for the dragon's left fore claw. At the last instant, as the Snort-Snout moved to strike him, he turned the Nimbus to the left, paralleling the ground just in front of the dragon for

a few seconds. The dragon had tried to follow his course, and blasted fire several meters behind. By moving from its defensive position, it had opened up a small hole to its right, and Harry flew into it. But unfortunately, in his concern about the dragon's snout and fore claws, he'd forgotten about the other end...

The massive tail of the Short-Snout slammed into the tail of his Nimbus with the force of a brick wall...moving about 150 kilometers per hour. He was fortunate to not have both of his legs crushed by the impact. Still, he and his shattered broom spun out of control, spiraling down, away from the dragon, and slamming into the rocks with bone-crushing force. The force of the impact with the Short-Snout's tail and the ground was too much for the Nimbus's Unbreakable Charm, and the broom shattered like it was made of glass. Harry didn't fair much better. He heard the CRACK of shattered bone, and his entire right side erupted in blinding pain. He rolled over, half-blind from his agony, the pounding in his skull threatening to rip his head apart. He managed not to scream, which probably just convinced Hermione and Ginny that he was already dead.

Though his blurred vision and shattered glasses, he managed to make out a massive turquoise shadow above him, and recognition returned, bringing with it the most basic of survival instincts. The adrenaline which flooded his system deadened the pain, and Harry somehow managed to drag himself behind a large rock, where he tried to figure out just how badly he was hurt. The fact that his right arm was swollen, bruised, and basically useless wasn't a good sign. He guessed he had a number of broken ribs, some serious bruising, and either a broken or twisted right ankle, he wasn't sure which. He was sure that if he hadn't been a wizard, he would have been killed by the impact.

His sense of sight, practically useless between the head injury that was affecting his coordination and his broken glasses, he closed his eyes, reaching for his magic. Then he stopped. He'd promised Daphne, Hermione, and Ginny that winning was not important, that survival took precedence over all. Harry struggled to his feet with his left arm, which seemed to be intact, and, leaning against the rock he was hiding behind, peered out at the dragon. He had to dive to the

ground as a sheet of fire descended upon him, missing him by less than a meter. *What the hell?* The dragons weren't supposed to attack the Champions, they were supposed to defend their nests...

Harry reached out and touched the mind of the dragon. He was met by hostility, rage, and malevolence well beyond that of a dragon trying to defend her young. The rage suddenly intensified, and Harry realized that making a mental connection probably hadn't been the best idea in the world. But before he was ejected from the creature's mind, he felt a Darkness that was too alien to have come from the dragon itself.

The pain was beginning to return. Desperate, realizing that declaring a forfeit wasn't going to accomplish anything with the dragon in the right mind to kill him, he supercharged a Numbing Spell onto himself. It was a stupid choice; he had a chance of killing himself, but if he was incapacitated by the pain he'd be dead anyway, and in considerably more painful fashion. The pain faded, and a general lack of sensation took its place. Feeling almost as if he was moving through a dream, Harry tucked his broken arm against his chest, picked up his wand with his left hand, and supported his weight with his undamaged left leg. He felt the dragon again, felt danger, fear, and aggression. At the last moment he scrambled for another cover as the dragon literally ripped the rock he was hiding behind out of the ground with a powerful blow. It let loose a deafening roar that Harry more felt than heard; all of his sense had been affected by the Numbing Charm. The dragon snapped at him with its jaw, but he got out of the way in time. Frantically, he tried to develop a plan.

The answer, the only answer, came to him just as quickly. He'd promised Daphne, but he was certain she'd rather have him magically drained than squashed flat by a dragon's fore claw. Taking several deep breaths, using the side of the stone as a lever, he flung himself into sight, fumbled his wand into position, and screamed.

This time, his magic was not manifested in the form of a purple beam of energy. Instead, it was more like a sheet of light. Harry watched, not through his eyes, but through his magical senses, as it shot outwards and struck the dragon's legs, shattering the huge bones like glass flutes. The dragon fell, crashing headlong into the ground,

roaring in agony. Harry's energy was leaving him rapidly. Desperately, determination and fire blazing in his eyes, he crawled forward, using only the left side of his body, dragging along the useless appendages on his right side. He scraped and clawed his way past the writhing dragon, moving past it almost unseen. He tore his way up into the nest, teeth gnashing together, groaning with every movement of his broken body. He fell over the edge, and grabbed onto the golden egg. He collapsed then and there, clutching his prize in his hands. Soon after, he felt himself being lifted out of the nest, taken away. He felt his guardian's presence, heard her voice, and relaxed a bit. Then he allowed unconsciousness to take him.

A/N: Shortest chapter I've written in a while. Hopefully it more than made up for in action.

Harry and Ginny are drawing closer, even if they are barely aware of it. Considering that it took exactly 2.3 more book to get this far than it took for them to be all over each other in HBP, I hope that I've won a few of you over to this 'ship. Yule Ball is timed rather nicely, isn't it? Again, the romance will never become the focus of the story. It's more of a much-needed distraction and stabilizing (well, at times) force for Harry.

Well, I promised that Harry was going to take a beating. You can see now why I had him face the Short-Snout instead of the Horntail. Can anybody say "skewered?"

Wizards can absorb a lot more punishment than normal humans can. The way I look at it, Harry's magic protected him from some of the impact, a la Neville bouncing down the road after his great uncle dropped him out the window. The reason that Harry was still able to function was a combination of his magical ability and raw adrenaline. If he didn't suck it up and fight, he was going to die. The dragon's aggressiveness is purposeful, and, as Harry's peak into the dragon's mind indicated, not natural.

Again, Krum gets shot down. All of the Champions got beaten up on this one. And, frankly, that sounds a lot more realistic to me. Cedric suffered some minor burns, and Harry got a little cut on the arm.

Fleur had her skirt set on fire, and Krum was unharmed. These are dragons, not young Blast-ended Skrewts. They are big, powerful, strong, and really dangerous.

Harry absolutely exhausted himself out there, so he's going to be off his feet for a while.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter 13: Dancing

Harry awoke slowly, emerging from unconsciousness as one might stagger out of waves at a beach. When he finally came to, he opened his eyes, then closed them just as quickly, blinded by the harsh fiery glare of the afternoon sun. He rolled over, and felt a hand on his shoulder, a hand too small to be Daphne's and too big to be Ginny's. Shading his eyes as best he could, he opened them again, and was met by the sight of Hermione sitting in a chair at his bedside. He smiled, "Hi," he croaked.

"Hello yourself," Hermione replied. "Nice of you to finally join us. We were starting to wonder if you'd wake up in time for the next Task."

Harry blinked. "How long have I been out?"

"Five days."

"What?!" Harry gasped. "What happened to me?"

"You mean you don't remember?" Hermione asked, sounding concerned.

Harry tried to think back to the last thing he was able to remember. *Ouch*. "I remember getting knocked off my broom by the Short-Snout," he said. "And I remember knowing that I was pretty banged up but not actually being able to feel it."

"That's probably why you pulled that boneheaded stunt," she said, her voice getting higher as she allowed more of her anxiety and anger into him. "You didn't actually bother to look down and realize that you'd broken-"

"Your right arm in two places, right wrist, right ankle, four ribs, bruised your hip, and suffered a terrible concussion that probably affecting your hearing and eyesight, to go along with a contusion on the right side of your head," Madam Pomfrey said as she moved into the space where Harry was resting. "And to top it all off, you were in apparently *just* enough pain to nearly kill yourself with an overcharged Numbing Charm, then magically drain yourself. In case you didn't know, Mr. Potter, when you feel pain, that is your body

telling you that it is injured and shouldn't continue doing whatever it was doing." The Matron's voice was harsh and accusing. Harry knew that she didn't like seeing him lying here as often as she did.

"I didn't have a choice."

"Yes, you did," Hermione insisted. "You could have called it off. The dragons were a lot nastier than everyone had thought, for some reason that completely escapes me. Cedric suffered some nasty burns to his face and back, Fleur twisted her ankle and nearly walked into a stream of fire, and Krum was just flattened by the Horntail."

"How bad was he hurt?"

"I don't know, because Mr. Karkaroff is refusing to allow me to attend to him. And I assure you, I am the most qualified Mediwitch within eighty kilometers. If anyone can fix him up, I can. But that man just whisked him away, back to the ship. Just from the accounts I've heard, I suspect both legs are broken, and he has some deep wounds from the spikes on the tail."

"I hope he's alright."

"*You* weren't any better," Hermione interjected. "*You* were just more boneheaded and stubborn, and decided to take a terrible risk for the sake of winning. You *swore* to me that survival was at the top of your priority list. I guess you were lying. Again. Ginny's just as upset as I am."

"You don't understand-"

"Yes, *I do*," Hermione practically screamed at him, tears streaming down her face. "You want glory more than anything else. You want to be recognized, to be admired, to be respected by your peers. You are determined not to look weak in front of them."

"HERMIONE!" Harry yelled, stopping her mid-rant. "Listen to me. Something was off about that dragon. I fought it because I didn't have a choice. The thing was set on killing me."

"That's impossible," Hermione protested.

"I'm fairly certain she's correct, Mr. Potter," the Matron said. "Albus assured me that the dragons chosen were protective females, ones that had shown no signs of unprovoked aggression at any point during their past."

"I'm sure that's true," Harry said. "But when I was fighting it, I looked inside its mind...I dunno, looking for an edge, I guess. It was dark, angry, enraged. Look, I've never been inside the mind of a dragon before, but I can't imagine that that's how they would normally feel. It didn't even care about the eggs. It just wanted to squash me like a bug."

Hermione had turned pale. "Are you saying that someone was controlling it?"

"Or at least enhanced its aggressiveness, made it hate me above everything else. I couldn't just forfeit, Hermione, because I knew the thing would kill me before anyone had a chance to stop it."

"This is all very worrisome, Mr. Potter, but I suggest that you take it up with Professor Dumbledore. I have a job to do. Miss Granger, tell Miss Weasley you'll be able to visit him in an hour or so."

Hermione gave him one last look and then departed, leaving her friend to be poked and prodded by the determined Mediwitch. He soon decided he might as well just say that he hurt everywhere. Five potions later, he passed out.

Charlie Weasley's eyes widened as he saw Daphne striding toward him. The Grey Maiden had expected this, and understood the reasons for the 2nd Weasley brother's concern, however unwarranted it was. "Mrs. Dressler," he said, backing up a few steps. This was one case where her reputation was more of a hindrance than a help.

"Don't worry, I'm not angry with you or anyone else here," Daphne said. Well, that wasn't strictly true. If what she suspected was correct, someone here was a traitor, and she was rather upset with him or her. "I'd just like to know, have the dragons been acting strangely, recently?"

"No more than is to be expected," Charlie said. He waved at the scene below. The pit was now filled with four enormous cages, each holding a sleeping or drowsy dragon. A few handlers milled around, probably arranging the details of the return trip. "We're still here because it takes time to get permission to transport dragons. We couldn't get it in advance because we couldn't give them the precise amount of time that we'd be here. So Lizzy is working out the arrangements with the Romanian government."

"I can imagine the paperwork," Daphne said, sympathetic. "But you haven't noticed anything out of the ordinary."

"Not really," Charlie replied. "The dragons are rather riled up, of course. It's to be expected. They've been taken out of their natural habitat, flown all the way here in massive crates, unable to stretch their wings, put in an arena with thousands of screaming people around them, and faced a person trying to somehow incapacitate them in order to steal something from their nest. You'll forgive us if we have to keep them sedated."

Daphne saw Charlie's point. No wizard would be completely normal after that kind of experience, either. Perhaps she was just being a bit too paranoid. But there were too many coincidences, too many suspicious and unexplained happenings. Something was up, she just knew it, even if she couldn't actually prove it. Her sixth sense, as it were, had never failed her before. She'd had bad dreams in the weeks leading up to the Siege of Hogwarts, felt uneasy before her life had come crashing down around her with the death of Edmond and her friends. It hadn't been just normal anxiety caused by the constant danger she had faced. It had been more than that: a deep and primal feeling of fear and worry that had been proven justified. "I see your point."

"Okay, then what is it that you are concerned about?" Charlie asked. "I'm going to assume that you aren't simply concerned that the Swede was able to bang around Harry. He did a number on the poor thing as well. It'll take weeks for her leg to heal. What *did* he do to it, anyway? It's almost as if it broke ten times and the pieces of bone all fractured! I've never seen that kind of damage to a dragon. And the scales around the leg are practically untouched."

“He’s powerful,” Daphne said, simply. “And to answer your question, I’m not so much concerned that the dragon was able to hurt Harry; that was always a realistic possibility. What I *am* concerned about is that the dragon seemed far more interested in harming him than she was in protecting her nest. Is that normal?”

Charlie frowned. “You thought that too, eh? Yeah, I wondered about that myself. The Horntail is an aggressive bugger, but even it didn’t lash out at Krum until he got too close. Tried to be cute with that Blinding Hex. Problem is that even a really powerful one, like the one he used, last only a few seconds, and makes the dragon ten times angrier.”

“Are Short-Snouts normally that hostile to flying objects?” Daphne asked.

“No, they aren’t,” Charlie said. “I mean, we have birds and such fly into our camp all the time. The dragons don’t really pay much attention to them. They just tend to ignore them, or casually watch them. But they don’t strike out at them, even if they are circling their heads over and over again. So I found that a bit odd, myself.”

“Charlie,” Daphne asked, her voice almost a whisper. “Is it possible for a very powerful Dark spell, one that affects behavior and judgment, to create that effect? To become more aggressive and fixate on a single target.”

“Well, hypothetically, yes,” Charlie said. “But I’ve never seen it done, or heard about it,” he added quickly. “Are you telling me that you think someone Cursed the Swede to decrease Harry’s odds of survival?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” Daphne replied. “I don’t know who, or how, but what you’ve just told me fits with my theory.”

“I don’t know, ma’am,” Charlie said. “Dragons are tough. Most magic doesn’t effect them, and getting into a dragon’s mind has got to be the hardest of all.”

“But it could be done,” Daphne pointed out. “And if that’s possible, then it has to be given serious consideration.”

Charlie shrugged. "I can't help you with that. I really ought to get down and help my buddies pack up the camp. We'll be leaving tonight."

"It's been good seeing you again, Charlie," Daphne said. "I haven't seen you in almost fourteen years. You've changed, and for the better, I might add. You were a bit of a troublemaker, back then."

"I've found my calling," Charlie said. "But I still know how to have fun. I suppose that we all change, over time. What we will be is as much a part of us as what we are now. We're always improving, or at least trying to."

When Harry next regained consciousness, he was met by the sight of a redhead sitting in the chair next to his bed, a book in her lap. She looked like she was close to falling asleep, and Harry could see that it was night outside. "Hello, stranger," he whispered.

Ginny jumped slightly, and then shook her head to clear it. "Hello yourself. How are you feeling?"

Harry tried to sit up, but Ginny reached over to stop him. "Madam Pomfrey told me to make sure you didn't try to do that. You need to lie down, Harry, your body isn't recovered. From what I understand, your body was so drained of magic when Madam Pomfrey tried to heal you that the spells and potions are working considerably slower than usual. On top of that, even as your magic is restored it's used to heal your body...which then slows down how fast it can be restored...so you have less magic with which to heal..."

"I get the point," Harry said, squirming a bit as he tried to find a comfortable position. Ginny helped him adjust his pillow. "Merlin, I'm exhausted, and I've been lying here for almost a week."

"Get used to it," Ginny replied. "Madam Pomfrey says she's not letting you go until Monday at the earliest."

"That's four days from now!"

“Three, actually. It’s Friday evening,” Ginny replied. “But that time will only increase if you keep trying to speed up everything.”

“Alright, have it your way,” Harry said. “Can you at least help me prop up my head so that I’m not talking to the ceiling?”

Ginny got up and helped him. It wasn’t comfortable, but at least he could look at her face without considerable effort. “So, what’s been going on while I’ve been out?”

“Well, you caused quite a stir with everything you did. I mean, what you did was bloody incredible. You somehow managed to knock out that dragon and drag yourself all the way across the arena with one leg, dragging a collection of damaged body parts with you, and then get into the nest and grab the egg. I’ve never seen anything like that. I needed too, though.”

“I’m sorry for scaring you like that,” Harry said, softly. He reached out and took Ginny’s hand in his, holding in a firm, but gentle grip. “That was about the worst case scenario that I could have imagined.”

“I thought you were dead,” Ginny blurted. “We all did. You just...one minute you were in the air, and I was just watching you, laughing and cheering, and then... Merlin, Harry, I just couldn’t imagine that you could have survived. You hit the rocks so hard, so fast.” Tears were glistening in her eyes now. “I just...”

“Sssh,” Harry shushed, squeezing her hand. “It’s okay. I made it through, and that’s what matter. I’m okay Ginny, I’m right here.”

“I know,” she said, wiping her tears away with her free hand. “I’ve never been that scared for you before. I just...I found myself wondering what I was going to do without you.”

“Don’t,” Harry told her. “It’s not going to accomplish anything but to upset you. I’ll be here for you, Ginny. I’m your friend, and I won’t abandon you.”

“It’s just...with the war, and all the danger we’re going to be facing...I don’t want to lose you...but I know we can’t just seal you in a room and wait for the danger to pass. You have to be out there, on

battlefield, you have to be a leader. And I'm scared, Harry. I'm scared that some of us won't make it. I don't know how I could possibly survive it."

"You will," Harry said. "I promise. You'll get through this, Ginny." He started to say that they all would, he stopped. *That* was a promise he just wasn't sure that he could keep. He didn't want to baby his friend, to give her the expectation that they could fight a war like the one that was coming and no one that she cared about wouldn't fall in the process. But somehow, someway, he knew that he *could* keep his promise to Ginny. He would keep her alive, even at the cost of his own life. The implications of that thought slammed into him. As a Slytherin, his first loyalty was supposed to be to himself, to his own interests, and his own survival. Yet if worst came to worst, he wasn't sure he could stand by and live if Hermione or Ginny died. They meant too much to him. Hermione he could understand; for all of their disagreements, they depended on one another and had endured hell together at the respective ages of eleven and twelve. But Ginny...

He didn't know. He couldn't understand. It was nothing against her; she was a wonderful, strong person, intelligent and cunning, yet still compassionate and understanding. She was a loyal friend that would never betray him. But somehow, his relationship with her was different than the one he had with Hermione. And he couldn't understand it. Even if he was in love with her, which he found extremely unlikely, he wasn't sure that this feeling could be explained in that manner.

Or perhaps it could. Daphne's grief and guilt over the death of her husband left little doubt in Harry's mind that Daphne would have, without second thought, flung herself in front of the Killing Curse that struck him down. She would have done the same for Lily.

And what he, Lily, and Edmond had in common was that Daphne had loved them. He supposed he *loved* Hermione in that sense. He'd often thought about her as a slightly older sister. The same went for Tonks, although, as much as Harry cared about the older girl, he didn't feel as dependent on her as he did with Hermione. But Ginny...he'd never thought of her that way. He'd never thought of her as a younger sister.

“Harry?”

Ginny’s voice snapped him back to the present. “Sorry,” Harry said. “Just got lost in my thoughts a bit...Ginny, try not to dwell on the future. The future is what it is. Daphne once told me that millions have tried to stop the future, and in the end, they’ve done nothing but create it. Because the future can be anything. Live in the present, and remember the past. But the future, at least, that far ahead in the future, is always changing. Trying to predict it, much less to prevent it, is pointless. How can one prevent something if one neither knows it will happen nor how it will happen?”

“I suppose you can’t,” Ginny said. “It doesn’t really make me feel any better, though, to know that I’m helpless to do anything about the future.”

“At least it will prevent you from worrying about thing you can’t change. Believe me, it’s a waste of time and effort. Apathy is one thing, realism is another. The only thing you’ll manage to do is make yourself feel worse about it.”

Ginny sighed, accepting that. She didn’t ask the question that occasionally poked its head above the ground: how does one determine what one can and cannot do? Is it any better to assume one is incapable of something and learn later that something could have in fact been done? Harry didn’t know the answers to those questions. He suspected he never would. If one could anticipate every possible consequence of one’s actions, one would never make mistakes. One would be perfect.

And if there was anything in this world that Harry was absolutely certain of, it was that *nothing* was perfect. And one didn’t really have to look that deep to find the warts hiding in plain sight.

Ginny squeezed his hand again. “Just...do your best to get through this. If not for yourself than for me, and Hermione, and all the people that really care about you. You have this tendency to forget the reasons that Hermione is always pestering you about your personal safety.”

Harry shook his head, at least as best as he could given his current position. "It's not that I *forget* them, Ginny, it's just..."

"You think we're wrong."

"No," Harry said quickly. "That's not it either...I can't really put my finger on it, Ginny. I just...I wish that I could listen, but I can't."

"Why?"

Harry noted that Ginny's question wasn't asked in a hysterical voice, as it often was when Hermione asked him the same thing. She wasn't really even indicating how she would feel about his response. She just wanted to know.

"I..." Harry said, trying to find the words. "I suppose that I...I don't know. I really don't know, Ginny. And I know that sounds stupid, especially if I'm obeying these mental commands without the slightest clue as to my motives, but, I just do...I can't put it into words. There are expectations that people have for me, for what I'll become, for what I'll accomplish. I *have* to meet them, or at least to try; I don't have any choice. I can't just throw away who I am, *what* I am. Is this making the slightest amount of sense to you?"

Ginny shrugged. "Yes...and no, at the same time."

"How do you mean?"

"Well...I understand that you have a destiny, and that you were, I suppose, born for a purpose. Maybe the universe is conspiring to put you in a position to fulfill that destiny, maybe you've internalized it to the extent that it's become an inseparable part of you, as deeply embedded as your love of flying. Or maybe it's a responsibility that you feel. I mean, everyone's afraid of failure, Harry. It's a part of all of us. To our ancestors, failure could mean death. I suppose it does in this case as well. Maybe you just don't want to disappoint everyone, not just because you don't want to be embarrassed, but because you believe, deep inside, that *if* you fail, everything will be lost. That you are the Wizarding World's *only* chance to emerge from this war free and prosperous."

Harry gaped at her. She blushed a bit when she saw his reaction. "I'm sorry," she said quickly. "That just came out. But it's true, at least...I'm pretty sure it's true. It's just not *fair*," she growled. "Why *you*? Why does it have to be *you*?"

"Maybe...maybe it's because I survived. I was spared for a reason, Ginny. And I suppose that it's my fault I was in that situation to begin with..."

Ginny frowned. "That's circular logic. Of the worst kind imaginable. You are blaming yourself for putting your life in jeopardy to fulfill a destiny, that, by your conscious choice puts your life in jeopardy. How in Merlin's name can you blame yourself for surviving when your parents died to fulfill your destiny when your destiny, according your logic, is the reason they died in the first place. And if you start blaming yourself for your own destiny, I'm going to slap you," she said. Harry could tell she wasn't joking. "You didn't ask for this, it was forced upon you. The only thing that you contributed was to be born, which you didn't have any control over, either. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

"I need to be moved to the Permanent Ward at St. Mungo's?"

Ginny did hit him this time, whacking him solidly on the arm. "Ow!" he protested. She glared at him. "Sorry," he apologized.

Ginny closed her eyes, rubbing them with her free hand. "Merlin, maybe over thinking this is just making it worse. I suppose we've established a few things, at least. You keep acting contrary to our expressed wishes because, for whatever reasons, you need to fulfill your destiny and don't want to be held back. You are not at fault for any of this, because you didn't chose or ask for it. You were just telling me not to think about trying to prevent things I have no control over."

"I know...I was reaching, I guess," Harry said. "You know about Survivor's Guilt, right? The idea that a person who managed to survive when people close to him died or suffered feels guilt about not being one of them. That they wonder why it was different, why they didn't suffer the same fate."

"Yes, but-" Ginny began. Harry cut her off.

"I'm not one of those people, Ginny. And the sole reason that is true is-"

"Because you *have* an explanation for how you survived. You survived because your mother *chose* for you to survive. You survived because you had *no choice* but to survive," Hermione said, moving toward them.

"How much-"

"Most of it," she admitted. "I'm not really sure what to say. It's making far too much sense for my own comfort. I suppose I just wish it didn't *have* to be true. But who am I to challenge the will of the universe?"

"That's one way of looking at it," Harry said, smiling. His smile faded quickly. "Hermione, I wish it didn't have to be this way. I suppose, in the long run, I'll probably wish it wasn't. But things have been set in motion that cannot be undone. To attempt to stop them is, well...probably more dangerous than simply going with them."

Hermione nodded, although her reluctance was clear. From the way she was biting her bottom lip, she wasn't very comfortable with the idea. But as she'd been forced to do before, she accepted it. Perhaps even permanently.

Conversation turned to more innocent things, including Hermione's intimidating rundown of all of the work that he'd missed while he'd been unconscious. She also commented that she was getting rather annoyed with Viktor Krum, who seemed to be spying on her in the library. Harry couldn't imagine that the Durmstrang Champion would do that kind of thing with any malicious intent, and told her so, for all the good it did. Hermione was apparently more annoyed with the amount of noise that his gaggle of admirers made when they followed him there.

Harry was buried. Around him was a virtual fortress of textbooks, from every single class that he was taking. It was a Saturday afternoon, and he was holed up in the library, two completed essays

lying on the table, one nearly complete one in front of him, and the blank parchment for six more lying on top of the books. He was nearly out of ink for his quill, and his hands were tired. While he'd been out, every single one of his teachers had decided to assign an essay, and Snape had given him two. Some of them were more liberal in terms of the extra time he had to complete them, others, like Snape, could really care less that he'd been unconscious for five days and bed-ridden for three more. It had been four days since he'd finally escaped the Hospital Wing, November had turned to December, snow had blanketed the ground, and he was still wasn't even close to catching up. He'd managed to stay on top of his assignments for the week, but hadn't finished all the reading he had missed. The sound of quill scratching parchment echoed in his ears.

...the Goblin revolts of 1789 demonstrated to Minister Mullen that the previously signed agreements were not to be honoured, and that the Goblins had decided that they wanted more concessions from the Ministry of Magic. Complicating the situation were simultaneous riots in France, coinciding with the complete overthrow of the magical and Muggle government there in the early stages of the French Revolution. A corrupt and powerful wizard named Maximillian Robespierre (ironic, because he was nicknamed "the incorruptible") quickly maneuvered himself into position to become the leader of the Revolution, flaunting previous conventions that forbade wizards from leading Muggle governments. In the end, the Goblins' timing was not to their benefit, as a conservative reaction in Britain to the French Revolution in both the magical and Muggle communities meant that the revolts were brutally put down, the leaders arrested and executed in a matter of days...

Harry marveled at what he'd just written, or rather, marveled at the fact that something that was so intriguing to him could be so incredibly boring because he was doing it for Professor Binns. This was the kind of history that fascinated him the most, the kind that brought in both the Wizarding and Muggle worlds and had repercussions in many countries. That this came on the heels of the American Revolution, a pivotal historical event led by a coalition of wizards and Muggles, in a show of unprecedented cooperation and respect of magical secrecy, only made it more intriguing. Yet he would rather be doing pretty much anything else at that moment.

"That looks fun," a familiar, sarcastic voice came from beyond the stacks of books in front of him. He pushed a number of them aside.

"Unless you are offering to do it for me, Blaise, I'd rather you didn't distract me," Harry replied, setting down his quill and shaking his hand to get the cramps out of it. "What do you want?"

"Do I have to want something?" his housemate asked, sitting down across from him. "Or is it not acceptable to merely want to talk with you. We haven't seen much of each other this year."

"No, we haven't," Harry agreed.

"Why is that? Did I do something to offend you or to alienate you? Or did you agree to stop associating with me to placate your friends who were wary of your interactions with other pureblood children."

Harry wasn't sure how to respond. Perhaps the second reason he'd given might explain his initial lack of contact, but he'd had a number of conversations with Daphne Greengrass, whom Hermione would consider a far more poisonous influence, without comment from either one of his friends. "I don't know. I suppose there really isn't anything stopping us from being friends again."

"I'm not sure we were ever really *friends*, but I appreciate the offer. I know you don't really have a reason to trust me, and I can see just from watching you that that is the thing you look for the most in a friend, but I'd like to earn that trust. I like you, Harry, because while you are a Slytherin, cunning and driven, you also have a conscience. I can't say the same of many of our classmates. You can about the consequences your actions have for other people. That's a valuable and rare quality in a person belonging to this House, and one that is to be commended, not derided."

"I appreciate that," Harry said, his words genuine. "What exactly do you want to do to earn my trust."

"At the very least, I can be another wand on your side. You are trying to take down Malfoy, to usurp him as the de facto leader of Slytherin. Taking him down as an individual will not be all that difficult, although he's a decent duelist as has received a great deal of training in the

last two years. But he has influence because of his family, and he has allies within Slytherin. He's also aggressive and paranoid. That can work to your advantage, or it can make your job much harder."

"Are you close to him, or something?" Harry asked, his voice a hushed whisper.

Blaise responded in kind. "I suppose you could say that. I drift from group to group, learning all that I can, taking few risks and trying not to offend or alienate everyone."

"Keeping your options open," Harry said. Blaise nodded.

"Yes. But I'm more inclined to join with you if you are willing to accept me. I think that I can help you."

"I'm sure you can," Harry said. "But, as you said, I value trust above all when I choose my friends. How do I know that I can trust you?"

"I suppose you can trust my morals, at least," Blaise said. "I pulled Granger out of the Forest because I felt it was the decent thing to do, not because I was trying to gain favor with you."

"I remember that," Harry said, "and I believe you. And as far as I can tell, you haven't told anyone about the Room of Requirement."

"I keep my promises," Blaise said. "If nothing else, trust in that."

"If I ask you to hide something from your parents, can I trust you to do that?" Harry asked. That was the key issue. Blaise was close to his parents and confided in them often. They expected him to provide them with information that they could use in their own interactions with the parents of his classmates. And if he couldn't get Blaise to promise him to not tell them certain things he didn't want them to know, he wasn't sure if this was going to work.

"Yes, I can," Blaise said. "I've...tried to separate myself from them, somewhat. It's not really the norm for a boy my age to be so attached to them. I suppose I've tried to be more independent, more free-thinking and self-reliant."

"How's that working out for you?"

"Well enough so far," Blaise said.

"Then maybe we do have something here," Harry said. "I can't make any promises. But I'll at least acknowledge your existence most of the time. We'll see what happens from there."

"We'll see," Blaise agreed. "Thank you for giving me this chance, Harry. I'm not going to disappoint you. If I find out anything that I think might be of value, I will tell you." With that, he was gone, leaving Harry to attack his pile of incomplete essays. He was still sitting there, buried near the back of the library, when the sun fell beyond the horizon. His stomach's repeated protests finally dragged him away from his work. He'd have to try again tomorrow.

"You are dancing, Harry, and well," Luna Lovegood said, stopping Harry in his tracks. It was Sunday morning, and he'd been on his way back to the library when the distant, nonchalant tones of the mysterious Ravenclaw brought him to a halt. He looked around, trying to find the girl who spoke them. She jumped out from behind a pillar.

"Have you been waiting for me?" he asked.

"Perhaps," Luna said. "Or perhaps you just happened upon me. The world doesn't revolve around you, you know. Coincidences happen. They happen more often than you'd think."

"I believe that, to a certain extent," Harry said. "But when there are too many coincidences, my experience tells me that there is usually a connection. Unless you were just hiding there, planning to ambush any poor soul that happened by, you were specifically waiting for me."

"Maybe," she said. "Or maybe you are looking for connections where there are none. Are you so certain that it *wasn't* a coincidence that the Swedish dragon was so furious with you and knocked you off your broom? How do you know that there was Dark Magic involved? Is it possible that you are just conceited, and your pride was hurt by being knocked around by that dragon? You were confident going in,

remember? Perhaps you are looking for plot where there are none, because you are afraid to admit that you were simply beaten?"

"Is that what you think happened?"

"I never said that," Luna said. "I was merely posing a hypothetical question, or, rather, a long series of them. Are you sure that you haven't had your brains addled by Huffworms? The side effect of a Huffworm infestation is rigid thinking."

It always amazed Harry that Luna could punctuated a deep, insightful conversation with such utter nonsense. And he was now certain that she knew it too and felt obliged to treat it as fact. Harry wasn't sure if that was out of respect for her father, because it distracted her from having to think about the more serious implications of her thoughts, or because she enjoyed messing with other people. "Luna, while I respect your judgment, I think you are wrong about this. What I felt in the mind of that dragon wasn't...natural."

"Have you ever been in the mind of a dragon before?" Luna queried.

"No, but..."

"Exactly."

"No!" Harry practically screamed at her. "Luna, I'm sorry, but there's no way that I managed to offend that dragon to the extent that it was focused on absolutely nothing except seeing me dead. Dragons aren't Dark Creatures. I'd expect to feel that in the mind of a werewolf, or a Dementor, but not a dragon. They aren't exactly peaceful, and they are predators, but the natural instincts of the dragon should have overridden any dislike of humans. When any creature's young is threatened, it protects them. That's hardwired into the brain of every single mother, human or otherwise."

"Remember, Harry, I was only playing Devil's advocate."

"So you think that I'm right?"

"I didn't say that."

Harry suppressed a groan. He wasn't sure what Luna's point was, or how she was trying to make it. All she was succeeding in doing was making him more and more irritated. Seeking to change the subject, he asked, "What did you mean by what you said before? That I was dancing well?"

"Must you seek a deeper meaning in everything?" she asked. Her tone wasn't exasperated, but as distant and vague as ever. "Perhaps the statement was meant to be taken literally."

"Luna, I can't dance. You'd know that if you cared enough to comment on it. It's a metaphor, isn't it?"

"Is it? If you want it to be, I suppose it can be. Our minds are very different, Harry. It's probably a mistake for you to assume you know how I am thinking, and vice versa."

You can say that again. "Assuming that it is a metaphor, what's it supposed to mean? I guess that I've heard dancing mentioned in the context of gathering allies, solidifying relationships, reconciling diverse motivations and ambitions into a common purpose. I suppose that would describe what I was doing."

Luna only nodded. Her emotions were impossible to read. If the eyes were the window to the soul, then Luna's badly needed cleaning.

"You think that I'm doing a good job?"

"If you are looking for vindication or approval from me, whatever you get isn't going to mean much. I was a bit mean to you last year, I suppose. So I've decided to be nice to you this year. If I have something mean to say, I'll just keep it to myself."

"You accused me of being blind when it came to Daphne," he reminded her.

"And so you are," she said. "That's a fact, one that cannot be ignored. To deny it, either to me or to yourself, would be to lie. You know it's true as much as I do. And Harry, it's nothing to be ashamed of. You are not objective when you analyze your guardian because you are close to her. You love her. That is certainly not a crime."

Harry blinked at her. "I understand that. But..."

"In time, you'll truly understand," she promised him. "It isn't your fault," she added.

"What isn't?"

Luna was silent, and Harry figured that she might have let something slip she hadn't intended. "So, about this new...attitude towards me. You are saying that I should take whatever you tell me with a grain of salt, because you've decided after sending me that nasty dream last year that you want to be nicer to me? How does that help me in any way?"

"Maybe it doesn't," Luna said. "Or maybe it does. It's up to you, really. I'll just go on about my business, watching, listening. That's my lot in life, you know? My greatest blessing is also my greatest curse."

"I don't..."

"In both cases, I am who I am," she said, smiling bitterly. "I can see things that others can't, I can look well outside the box, I can play tricks with the minds of others, and see what they are thinking. But because I understand, I am lost when among those that I observe. I don't think like them, I don't act like them, and I don't speak like them. They think that I am strange, maybe even insane. Perhaps they are right. Dad always said that the Gupas would get me at an early age. They infest your brain and make it work backwards. For some reason, you can still talk normally, but you think backwards," she added by way of explanation. Harry gaped at her for a moment.

"I understand..."

"No," Luna said. "You don't. You never will. And you should be grateful for that."

With that, Luna was gone. Harry stared after her, trying to understand the implications of what she had just told him.

Harry began to pack up his bag, clearing his books, quill, and ink off the desk. A double Potions class had just ended, and he was anxious to get to the Great Hall for some lunch. He had the strap nearly over his shoulder when he felt, more than saw, Snape looming over him. He had to fight not to show any reaction. Despite Daphne's urgings, he found it extremely difficult to suppress the memories of what he had seen. They hadn't had an Occlumency lesson since that day. "Professor?" Harry asked.

"Potter," Snape replied. "I've been asked by the Headmaster to remind you of something. One of the traditions of the Triwizard Tournament is the Yule Ball."

"I know," Harry said. "I've done my reading on the Tournament."

"Have you also read that its expected that the Champions and their dates will begin the dance?" Snape asked, a somewhat evil smile forming on his lips. It wasn't malicious; it was the closest Snape ever got to an expression of amusement. As for the question, Harry hadn't picked up that particular detail. His response was indicative of that.

"No, sir, I didn't," Harry admitted.

"Then I suggest you find a date, and quickly. Do you even know how to dance?"

"I'm certain that I can learn."

"Then do so," Snape said simply, then disappeared back into his office. In the past, the Potions Master would have tormented him for considerably longer. Now, after Harry's display of power in the First Task, and his rage towards Snape because of what he'd seen, Slytherin's Head of House seemed determined not to provoke him. It might even be safe to say that he was afraid of Harry. Or afraid of Daphne. In Snape's mind, they had to be the same thing. Daphne had been waiting for an excuse for a long time, and all she needed to do was to tell Sirius or Remus what Harry had discovered, and stand back while one or both of them tore him into bloody pieces. Remus would not even need to be transformed to accomplish it.

But now, Harry was faced with a larger problem. He needed a date.

He supposed that it might not be so intimidating as it sounded. Harry knew that Hermione or Ginny would be with him as a friend if he asked either of them to. But...well, this was an opportunity, he supposed, to see if there was something more between them. Really, once he thought about it, he didn't have many doubts. If he wanted to ask someone to the Yule Ball with any intention of starting a relationship, it had to be Ginny. He...did like her more than he admitted to himself. She was pretty, she was caring, compassionate, and understanding. She wasn't as constantly on edge as Hermione was, and she knew how to restore sanity to his life when it needed restoring.

He cared for Hermione dearly, maybe even loved her, but as a brother would love a sister. They just weren't compatible. They both thought the same way, although they expressed themselves differently. And he'd never really felt anything of that sort for her anyway. And, Harry supposed, that was the most important factor. If he didn't feel anything for Hermione, how could he enter into a relationship with her? Relationships were not formed by careful considering of a person's flaws and graces, and an analysis of how they would complement his own.

But he *did* feel something for Ginny. That much he knew, and he wanted to act on it. This was as good a time as any. He was certain that she'd agree. Did she feel the same way? He wasn't sure. Much of her hero-worship was gone, although she always looked up to him and used him as a role model. But that was because she respected his experience and "wisdom," he thought, not because she still had this image of an eleven-year old conquering hero etched in her memory.

He'd move slowly, he knew. He didn't know where this would lead, didn't know if this could or would possibly work out. Maybe he was wrong about them. Maybe Ginny didn't feel the same attraction for him that he felt for her. If that were the case, rushing into something might destroy the friendship that he so valued. He *needed* Ginny Weasley by his side, either as a friend or as...something more. Of that he was completely certain. He didn't know much about relationships, knew little of love between two unrelated people, but he

did know that he needed to have her on his side. Just as he needed Hermione.

So, he supposed, if he asked Ginny to the Yule Ball, they'd both go into it with the knowledge that it was nothing more than it appeared. If things went well, if they felt something mirrored in one another, then they see where it took them.

But, Harry knew, it was not that simple. There were many other things to consider. It was easy enough to say that one didn't care what others thought of them, but Harry never deceived himself into believing that was true. Perception was far more important than reality in the game that Harry was getting ready to play. Ginny's family complicated the situation, in more ways than one. Beyond the fact that her family might have a collective heart attack at the thought of Ginny being the girlfriend of Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived-For-A-Destiny-That-He-Did-Not-Understand, the Weasleys were not a popular family. They were considered as bad as blood traitor got by most purebloods, a shadow of a formerly respected Light family that practically lived in poverty and freely associated with Muggles. Arthur Weasley headed up an office intended to protect Muggles from wizards. To many Light families, this was an insult of the highest order. The Weasleys were almost universally hated by Dark pureblood families. To be seen with Arthur's daughter would alienate the others, even to the extent of erasing the possibility for alliances. *At least she's a Slytherin*, Harry thought.

But if he were to yield to these pressures and ask someone else, he risked alienating Ginny and Hermione. They trusted each other implicitly, and he'd be betraying them by bringing in an outsider. He'd also send a message that he wasn't interested in either of them, something that could be very hurtful if Ginny reciprocated his feelings.

Trapped between a rock and a hard place, with no way out but a jump into a riverbed of needles.

Harry would need to put some serious thought into this.

And I still don't even know how to dance.

Dumbledore gazed at her over his half-moon spectacles, his face set and grim. It was late at night, the only time when she could be certain of having a chance to speak with him without being interrupted. Of course, Daphne Dressler hadn't been expecting her old Head of House to be present, either. Or Snape. "You do understand the seriousness of the allegations that you are making, of course," he said slowly. "You are accusing someone of using illegal magic to bring about the death or serious injury of children."

Daphne's gaze was cold as ice. "I suppose I needn't remind you that Voldemort has never had a problem with moral quandaries. Or finding ways to get what he wants."

"Daphne," McGonagall said. "The only people with access to the dragons would have been their handlers, most of whom I taught myself, or whose teachers I know, the Hogwarts faculty, and the judges. You are accusing them at the least of gross incompetence, at the worst, of being a traitor."

Daphne met McGonagall's glare. "Yes, I am. I am merely stating what the facts have led me to believe."

"Or, perhaps, you are looking for conspiracies that are not there, Dressler," Snape whispered. "I know the Dark Lord. I know how he operates. This is not his way. He will delegate responsibility for an important assassination to his underlings at times, but he will never order them to use a method that might possibly allow the target to survive. If he wants Potter dead, he wouldn't rely on a crazed dragon to do it for him."

"And just how *would* he do it, Snape?" Daphne spat. "I suppose you'd be quite knowledgeable in that area, after all."

"Enough," Dumbledore interjected. "This is accomplishing nothing. I will not have you making unsubstantiated accusations against anyone, least of all anyone in this room. Severus, because of his past, is a valuable source of information. Not an automatic suspect."

"I wasn't implying anything of the sort," Daphne said, taking a few deep breaths. "I trust your judgment enough to assume that you'd know if he'd returned to his former master."

"Yes," Dumbledore said. He looked even older than he was at this moment. "So, Mr. Weasley told you that such behavior, such a mental state, is unnatural for a dragon, even one taken out of its natural surroundings and subjected to such an ordeal as this."

Daphne tried to think of how to best phrase this. "He didn't say *exactly* that. He wasn't entirely sure of what the dragon's ordeal would have done to her mental state. But we know there are spells capable of creating a compulsion to murder. A *corrupted* version of the Imperius Curse, if such a thing were possible."

"Even if it did exist," McGonagall reminded her, "it would take an extremely powerful spell cast by a remarkably strong Dark wizard. And there would be more of a chance of detection than success." She looked to Dumbledore for confirmation.

"I am not aware of everything, Minerva," he reminded her. "Many things, but some slip past with my recognition. It would be possible to conceal such magic."

"Are you at least in agreement with me that something is amiss?" Daphne asked.

"Perhaps," Dumbledore said. "I am greatly concerned by the possibility that we may have been infiltrated by agents of Lord Voldemort. All of us can feel the darkness rising once more. I have been to the Dark Forests in the Balkans. The creatures are restless, more aggressive than I have seen them before. We all knew that because Voldemort had survived the darkness had not been banished, that we had been granted only a temporary reprieve. That time is drawing to a close."

"Perhaps, Albus," McGonagall said. "But how would he gather his followers if he exists only in human form? Has he been restored to the extent where he, personally, is a threat? He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named ruled by fear, kept his followers in line with threats and by making examples of those that did not serve him as well as they should have."

"There are ways," Snape said in a soft voice, "Dark rituals that can restore a drifting spirit to corporeal form. Many of these were

developed by Salazar Slytherin himself. The man was obsessed with immortality, obsessed with out-living the other founders. And yet, by a twist of fate, he was the first of them to die.”

“By Gryffindor’s blade,” Daphne interjected. “Albus, we cannot allow Voldemort to maneuver freely. We must strike first, stop him before he gains too much power. His followers are scattered, most in hiding and the rest imprisoned. He is as weak and vulnerable as he will ever be. If we want to preserve as many lives as we can, we should root out the traitor here and deal with him.”

“Such aggression is unwise, Dressler,” Snape cautioned. “It is a paradox of sorts. The Dark Lord cannot be defeated until he returns to body. One cannot destroy a spirit easily. We don’t know where he is, or what he is planning. If we move too quickly, we may force him to panic. We aren’t ready, not yet. The Wizarding world is divided and uncoordinated. Alliances of old have crumbled to dust. The Ministry is a corrupt and powerless entity, and that fool Fudge has driven them into the ground.”

“So, we should wait. Wait for him to become a threat again. Wait for the Darkness to return, to sweep over the land and claim more lives, *before* we act?” Daphne asked, incredulous.

“Daphne, there is nothing we can do to stop the coming Darkness,” Dumbledore said, his voice tired and fatigued. I have consulted dozens of seers, hundreds of magical instruments. And I have met with the same response each time. There is nothing we can do to stop the rise of Lord Voldemort. It is part of the natural magical cycle. We can prepare, so that when he has returned, and gathered his forces, we will be able to make a stand. But you and I both know that the Aurors are not strong enough to stand up to his forces. The newest generation of soldiers are growing up as we speak. They will be the leaders of this war, just as you were a leader of the last war. It is always the young that suffer the most.”

As Dumbledore finished, there came several knocks on the door. “Come in,” Dumbledore said. The massive oak doors swung open, and Alastor Moody hobbled into the room. Daphne frowned.

"Sorry that I'm late, Albus," he growled. "Overslept. Happens in my old age. I'd better be more careful."

"Indeed," Daphne said quietly, staring at him. It was shockingly out of character for Moody to be late for anything, let alone for him to admit that it was because he let down his guard. Moody had taught her most of what she knew about how to operate in a hostile environment, how to keep an eye out for threats, how to survive in a world that was determined to get you when you turned your back. He'd always lived by that creed, and it had allowed him to become the Ministry's most accomplished Auror, and survive multiple attempts to end his life. Daphne had a hard time believing that even old age could eventually soften the hard man.

Dumbledore explained what Moody had missed, but Daphne tuned him out. Carefully, she observed Moody, checking his movements, his posture, his inflection and choice of words. It was *familiar*, but somehow...not quite what she had grown so accustomed to. It seemed almost exaggerated at times, as if he had taken his trademark eccentricity to another level in order to prove to himself and others that he hadn't lost a step.

Daphne supposed that it wasn't inconceivable to believe that so many years apart from the war had changed him. A man like Moody lived for times of conflict. He was a soldier, a textbook professional and a battle-hardened veteran who had trouble adjusting to "peacetime." Moody had first seen combat as a young fighter in Dumbledore's army against Grindelwald. He'd never married, never even considered the possibility. He trained obsessively, even as his experiences robbed him of body parts. He was as nimble and capable as any healthy wizard, although he would probably still say, in private, that he was merely a shadow of his former self.

"So, you see a plot here, Daphne?" he asked. His voice wasn't accusatory, nor did it carry with it the implication that he thought she was wrong. Knowing Moody as she did, she guessed she had already gained a supporter.

"There are only so many coincidences that I can observe before I refuse to see connections. Someone wanted Harry in the Tournament.

There can only be a few reasons why anyone would want that. Someone might seek to test him, to see what he can handle. Someone might also wish harm upon him. If Lord Voldemort was trying to decide if Harry, no longer protected by his mother's sacrifice as he was during their last two face-to-face meetings, was worth his time, trying to see if he could kill Harry without having to lift a finger or expose himself would be an advisable option," she concluded.

Moody nodded, a small smile breaking his scarred face. She saw pride there, but somehow, it didn't reach his eyes. She imagined the times when she, a young, inexperienced Auror trainee, would look to him as a sort of a father figure, and she remembered the pride she felt when she hit upon the right answer. Years had passed since then, but the dynamic between them remained remarkably unchanged.

"Exactly what I'd expect a disciple of 'Mad-Eye' Moody to say," Snape retorted, his voice disgusted. "You must understand, Dressler, that I do in fact care about Harry's welfare, as a member of my House. But while I am willing to consider the possibility that we may have been infiltrated, and I will keep a close eye out for signs of treachery, I would refrain from making our suspicions known and making accusations."

"So, we just let the traitor operate until he makes a mistake?" Moody replied. "Potter could be dead by then."

"I believe that we will be able to protect him, and as we've already seen, he's quite resourceful," Dumbledore said. Once again, he was trying to play peacemaker, regardless of his own personal beliefs. If given the chance, Snape and Daphne might end up in a duel to the death, and Moody wouldn't be far behind.

"If you are going to use his survival in the First Task as an example, then you are very much in error. Harry was lucky to get out of there at all, much less alive. He spent nearly a week in the Hospital Wing recovering from his injuries and magical exhaustion. The next time he tries that, it might kill him. He took a tremendous risk because he felt that he had no choice. He understands the risks involved. I'm not going to stand by and have his life placed in further jeopardy because you are afraid to offend others."

“Do you actually have a suspect, Dressler?” Snape asked. “Or are you just making a lot of noise with no purpose in mind? Unless you plan to accuse Karkaroff – and I assure you, he doesn’t have the daring or the stealth for such an operation – there is no one else that has ties to the Dark Lord. Well, except for me, of course,” he said, daring her.

“Don’t be stupid,” she told him. “Fine. We’ll wait. But if something happens, I’ll remember this,” she said. Frustrated, yet unable to find a way around their logic, she turned and left. She felt Moody’s magical eye watch her every step of the way. He wouldn’t be happy about the way she had lost her composure.

She put that out of mind. She had work to do.

A/N: Well, Daphne is actually right in this instance. However, Dumbledore's inaction is also justified in this case because Daphne has almost no evidence and absolutely no suspects. So they can't really do much at this point.

Harry and Ginny's relationship is very complicated. Outside of the interpersonal conflicts (i.e., Ginny's view of Daphne), he has a lot of political considerations. Because of his importance, he doesn't have the luxury to live like a normal kid his age.

I feel Hermione's been underdeveloped of late, basically because I overreacted in trying to develop Ginny. I think I've succeeded at that, but I've made Hermione into this whining, negative nancy, and I don't want that. I never like to use abrupt plot ideas to tell my readers what to think about relationships. That's supposed to come from the thoughts, words, and actions of the characters. Tonks will also get some more exposure starting with Sacrifice. She's not a romantic interest, she's a big sister.

If you are confused about Luna, than that's good, because so am I.

Blaise was a character that I introduced with the intention of making into a replacement for Ron’s role, but kind of messed it up. He has some potential, and Harry needs all the allies within Slytherin that he can get.

Harry hasn't forgotten what he saw in Snape's memories. He tried to, but that wasn't ever going to happen. But he needs him for the Occlumency lessons. Harry hasn't suffered from dreams at Hogwarts because of a combination of the wards, his basic Occlumency skills, and his willingness to block the dreams. Unlike canon Harry, he's not looking to the dreams as a source of intelligence, but rather as a nuisance and a potential danger.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter 14: Formalities

Harry stood across the room from Hermione, and dropped into a dueling stance. She did the same an instant later. Around them, the members of their Defense Against the Dark Arts class, including Ron Weasley and Draco Malfoy, watched in anticipation of the two friends wiping each other out in some kind of spectacular explosion. Harry didn't intend to give them such satisfaction.

"Wands at the ready," Moody instructed.

The grizzled Auror had introduced them to a number of basic dueling techniques in his recent lessons, continuing his trend of focusing on practical knowledge over textbook learning. While a number of Harry's classmates were already experienced duelists, some of them were learning these things for the first time. He could have chosen a different pair, but he'd decided to go with Harry and Hermione, probably because he was certain that the duel wouldn't get too ugly. As competitive as they both could be, neither one wished harm upon the other.

Harry began to plan his basic strategy. He'd decided to try to just pester Hermione at first, staying on the defensive until she began to become overaggressive. Hermione was relatively patient, but so enthusiastic that she'd occasionally lapse into bad habits. Her aggression was less focused, and when she'd exhausted her fury, she became overly defensive, over-thinking her spell casting and trying to anticipate what her opponent would do next. Harry would play right into that and then pummel her with physical spells to weaken her defenses. Nothing too powerful, of course; this was just a demonstration, not the real thing. He assumed that Hermione would stay away from fire-related spells as well. Her lessons with McGonagall had been sporadic, and hadn't been going all that well.

Hermione immediately took the offensive. Rather than the long, somewhat dramatic movements she tended to use, she minimized her movement. "*Percutio*," she cast.

"*Protego*." The purple streak of magic from Hermione's wand struck the blue barrier and was deflected into the floor. The dueling platform was rectangular, maybe four meters wide, which didn't leave them

with much room to maneuver. Still, Harry continued to shift from side to side, staying on the balls of his feet in case Hermione threw something his way that he wasn't prepared for. Their eyes locked, each searching their opponent for his or her intentions, trying to anticipate what the other would do next.

"Duelling isn't just about casting lots of spells and hoping for the best," Moody was saying. "It's about probing your opponent, learning his strengths, weaknesses, and habits, and then having the wherewithal to exploit them. Duels can be over in seconds or they can drag on for considerably longer if the duelists are well matched. I've seen some last hours. The reason that doesn't often happen is that dueling takes a lot out of you. Eventually, someone makes a mistake.

As if on cue, Hermione loosed a Stunner and a Blinding Hex, followed by a Cutting Charm as almost an afterthought. His shield blocked the first two, but the last got through. He spun out of the way but the third spell nicked his shoulder. It was a minor injury, but Hermione had drawn first blood.

Regaining his focus, Harry moved forward and cast a pair of Burning Hexes as he neared, followed up by a Stunner. Hermione froze for an instant before reacting, costing her any chance she had of blocking the incoming spells. She dove out of the way, landing on all fours, but the back of her robes was set afire by one of the Burning Hexes. "*Aguamenti*," she hissed, bending down, her wand pointed over her shoulder. The Extinguishing Hex did its job, but Hermione was left vulnerable, and Harry struck. "*Jacio!*"

One of the newest spells he'd added to his arsenal, the Flinging Hex picked up his friend and hurled her to the other end of the platform, where she landed hard on her back. He moved in for the kill, but to his surprise, Hermione recovered fast enough to hit him with an Impediment Jinx. In the time it took him to cast the counter-spell, Hermione was back on her feet, apparently no worse for the wear.

Moody applauded. "Excellent, Granger. A perfect recovery and a fine choice of spells. Potter, you need to be less overconfident. She's good, this one."

Harry kept that in mind as he let a pair of Striking Hexes go past him. They were locked in combat now. He could feel the eyes of his classmates studying him. Very few students had spoken to him since he'd finally escaped the Hospital Wing, but he got the sense that they were in awe of what he'd managed to accomplish with half the bones in his body broken. He preferred it that way; silent admiration was never a burden. And he'd certainly gained some respect

He struck again, this time firing three Stunners, shifting his aim on each ever so slightly so that one shot straight at Hermione and the other two flew to either side of her, making a dodge impossible. She used a Shielding Spell, and deflected the center spell into the ceiling while the others shot past her. She was more capable with defensive magic than he had remembered. She and Ginny had been working on their own recently, and it had paid off.

After blocking Hermione's counter-attack, Harry charged her again, but more aggressively this time. She was frozen by the sudden movement and took several steps backwards. Harry was able to block a desperate Disarming Spell and then started another attack. With a much shorter distance between them, blocking spells became that much harder. Harry was gambling on the assumption that, despite her improvement, he was still the more capable with defensive magic. He loosed two Bludgeoning curses of moderate power – he was trying to knock her down, not hurt her – adjusting the force behind them by taking the urgency and emotion out of his voice. She threw up a shield, as he'd expected, but it was only half-formed, and the force of the impact from the first Bludgeoning Curse knocked her back and broke her concentration, so that the second hit her squarely in the chest and hammered her to the floor. A quick Disarming Charm, and it was over.

Harry hurried over to make sure he hadn't hurt her. She was groaning, but she sounded more angry than in pain. She glared at him. "You didn't tell me you knew the Flinging Hex," she said, getting to her feet without his assistance.

"Very good," Moody growled. "A fine demonstration of technique and strategy from both of you. You still have a ways to go, of course, but that's to be expected. Potter, you might have pressed your advantage

better, and been more prepared for her counter-attack. The rest of you will write an essay, due next class, in which you will describe several techniques that we've discussed that these two used, how they used them, how effective they were, and what could have been done to counter them. Class dismissed."

"Sorry," Harry whispered, as the rest of the class filed out. "I didn't mean to hurt you. Are you sure that you're alright?"

"Fine," Hermione said, brushing herself off. "That was rather impressive, Harry. I wasn't expecting a physical dimension, and that second charge caught me completely off guard. How's your shoulder?"

"It fine," Harry said. "You put up a pretty good fight."

"I try," she said, modestly.

"Very impressive," Moody said. "Come over here, both of you."

They did as he asked, approaching with a bit of trepidation. Moody hadn't really made an effort to connect with any of his students, certainly not in the same way that Remus had the previous year. "Yes, professor?" Hermione asked.

"You two have definitely been practicing outside of what you are asked to do for this class; I mean it as a compliment. I applaud your initiative and wish that others would do the same. When the war comes, most of my students will be entirely unprepared. Even the 7th Years are more concerned about what they might be asked about when they take their N.E.W.T.s than anything that's useful or practical in combat. I'm pleased to see that such apathy is not universal."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said. "My guardian has spoken highly of you, and feels that you were the perfect choice to serve as the instructor of this course for this term. Based on everything we've seen, I'd say she's right."

"Daphne has always been sharp," Moody remarked. "I appreciate the compliment, Potter. I trust Albus, but sometimes I think he's a little too reluctant to expose all of you to what it is you will be facing. Now, I'm

afraid that I need to get a few things done, so I'll have to cut this meeting short." Moody looked strangely concerned about something, and glanced at the clock hanging on his wall. "You two had better be off."

"But, sir-" Hermione began.

"That's not a request, Miss," Moody growled, turning around quickly. Harry reluctantly followed her out.

Once they were out of earshot, Hermione asked, "What do you suppose that was about? One minute he seemed poised to have a long conversation with us, a talk that I've been looking forward to, and then the next he's ordering us out with a vague and unsatisfying explanation."

Harry was puzzled as well. Something wasn't quite right. Perhaps he ought to mention it to Daphne. He planned to see her later that afternoon to discuss the possibility of taking Ginny to the Yule Ball, as well as to...well, ask her to teach him how to dance. He knew that she was at least competent, as most Pureblood heiresses were required to be, and figured that her agility in combat should serve her well on the ballroom floor. Though he was also concerned about Hermione. Would she understand? Occasionally, he'd seen an unexpected flash of jealousy from Hermione when he'd been spending a lot of time with Ginny. Harry had guessed that perhaps she feared being left alone; he knew she hadn't gotten on well with her Muggle classmates when she'd been younger.

"So, Harry, have you thought about who you are taking to the Ball?" Hermione asked. His internal conversation faded into the distance, replaced by more than a little shock at how bluntly Hermione had posed the question.

"Well, yes," he said. He was nervous now, uncertain as to whether this was Hermione's indirect way of asking him to invite her. As friends, of course, he knew. But the fact that he wasn't sure, and the fact that he'd essentially already settled on another, caused him to sweat a little. "I have a few ideas."

"You are aware that the Champions traditionally open the Ball, right?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, I am," Harry replied, a little irritation showing in his voice. What was he supposed to do now? He still hadn't the slightest clue what Hermione meant by bringing it up. He had some trouble understanding girls, but with almost anyone besides Hermione, he'd probably assume it was a veiled request for an invitation. Well, if Tonks posed the question, she'd undoubtedly be just attempting to mess with him in the process.

Harry wasn't sure he'd ever felt so entirely lost in his entire life.

"Well, the date is fast approaching, so you'd best get a move on it. I'm sure there are quite a few people interested in going with you."

This was getting worse and worse, Harry decided. Maybe, just maybe, Hermione was hinting at Ginny, but she might also be making a desperate plea on her own behalf. If she were doing it for that reason, it would also mean that their friendship wasn't exactly in terrific shape at the moment. That wasn't good either. "I suppose. Just as I said, I have a few people in mind...I need to think it over, that's all."

"You don't need to take my advice, Harry, but I'd suggest picking someone you know well. This wouldn't be the time to ask out Cho Chang."

Harry felt his ears turning red. Yes, he thought Ravenclaw's Seeker was quite pretty, and she seemed nice enough, but he'd never really felt anything for her. Still, the fact that Hermione had been able to detect, or at least guess that with so little information was unnerving. He was still unable to determine anything about her intentions from her voice. Well, he could tell that she was getting progressively more irritated as her not-so-subtle hints failed to penetrate his thick skull.

That wasn't the problem. He knew that she was making hints and that she was trying to point him in a certain direction. He was just unable to determine which direction she was pointing him in, and the possibility of making the wrong assumption terrified him.

"I wasn't really considering that," Harry said. "And I think you are right."

"Oh for the love of..." Hermione fumed. "*Boys!*" she hissed, then stormed off.

One word echoed through Harry's mind as her footsteps grew softer.

Shit.

Daphne's laughter wasn't exactly the kind of answer that he'd been hoping for when he'd explained his situation. He rarely heard his guardian laugh, but while he didn't necessarily mind when it was at his expense, at this moment, it made him angry. He glared at her until she stopped.

"To be perfectly honest with you, Harry, I'm not sure what she means, and I appreciate your predicament. I also sympathize with her."

"But what do *you* think she means?" Harry demanded.

"If you are making the assumption that all women, regardless of age, communicate with some kind of secret language that is entirely indecipherable to men, I'm afraid you are making a rather large mistake," Daphne said. "To answer your question, I *think*, based on your relationship to this point, that she's trying to get you to ask Ginny. But I'm not sure. The other things that you've told me make it rather difficult to discern her motives. But Hermione doesn't strike me as the type of girl that would demand that you take her to the Ball to maintain her own self-esteem. I think she values your friendship more than that, and is content to simply be at your side in other ways."

"So what you are saying, essentially, is that she is probably telling me to ask Ginny, but not necessarily, and you aren't going to let me assume that you are right and then take the blame when she refuses to speak to me for the rest of the year."

"A rather cynical way of looking at it, but, regardless, yes," Daphne said. "I don't know your friends as well as you do, nor perhaps as well

as I should. I've never exactly been in her situation, either. I never went up to James and hinted that he should ask out Lily. He didn't need my encouragement."

"Did you ever talk to Lily about it?"

"No," Daphne said. "Though your father won me over eventually, I was never convinced that he was the right person for your mother to spend the rest of her life with until a few months before they married. I was wrong, obviously. As strangely as it may have begun and as tragically as it...ended, they were made for each other." She grimaced, probably trying to fight off tears.

"There is another problem. I don't dance."

Again, Daphne burst out laughing. *This is probably a record.* "What is it this time?" he asked, irritably.

"Lily was one of the most horrendous dancers you will ever see. It was remarkable how uncoordinated she was. James was perfectly competent, but Lily was a disaster."

"That's encouraging," Harry replied, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "Do you suppose you could help me to discover which genes I inherited?"

"Certainly," Daphne replied. "My father taught me to dance formally when I was a young girl, as part of my training. It's not something I'm especially fond of, but I can teach you enough basic steps that you'll make a good accounting of yourself."

"Alright," Harry said. "Daphne?"

"Yes?"

"Say I do invite Ginny to the Yule Ball. Is there anything that I should bear in mind?"

"Outside of not making her hate you until the sun explodes? I doubt her brother will be especially pleased. And some might question your choice. The Weasleys aren't at all respected by the Purebloods, and

if you enter into any kind of lasting relationship some might refuse to ally with you on principle. Basically, Harry, there are concerns, and some of them are worrisome. It comes down to this: is what you have or will have with Ginny worthwhile and promising? If it is, then you shouldn't allow political considerations to dictate your actions. But if it isn't..."

"Then it isn't worth the risk," Harry finished. "I understand...sort of." He took a deep breath and let it out. "I think I'm probably going to ask her. If I'm wrong about Hermione...well, I'll just do what I can to make her understand. She isn't the kind of person to hold that kind of grudge for very long, and she's close to Ginny."

Daphne looked him in the eyes. "Harry, you are getting to the point in your life where you need to make you own decisions. I don't mind helping you, offering advice and guidance, but I cannot make your choices for you. You must learn to be independent or you won't be able to cope when I'm not here for you anymore."

The fact that that time might not be in the distant future weighed heavily on both of them. Harry sensed that his guardian felt she didn't have long to live, and while he knew that it would be a terrible loss, he thought he could recover from it. At least he hoped that he could.

"I understand," Harry told her. "I know I need to show some independence, to act on my own without looking to others for approval every step of the way."

"That's not to say you should try to go it alone," Daphne cautioned. "You have wonderful friends, Harry, and the potential to gain a number of allies. You will need help to win the coming war. It isn't enough to merely vanquish Voldemort, a task much easier accomplished if you can send your allies against his followers. You must hand the Darkness complete and utter defeat. It is the cycle, one that has been a part of wizarding history for centuries. Most of the time, the Light triumphs, crushing the Darkness and driving its leader from power, forcing his followers underground and establishing peace."

"But other times..."

"The Light is not always victorious. There have been periods throughout our history when Darkness reigned and attempts to destroy it met with defeat. Actually, there are only a few instances of the Dark being overthrown; much of the time, it consumes itself. The Dark Lords rule by fear and threats. Such a rule cannot sustain itself; eventually, it will collapse if the populace is not content," Daphne explained. "But the price that is paid...you must not allow yourself to be willing to settle for a short period of rule by Lord Voldemort, with the knowledge that he will eventually fall. You and your friends would not live to see it."

"I'd never allow Voldemort to win," Harry swore. "I'd do anything in my power, including sacrificing my own life, if it were necessary to defeat him."

"If that is true, then you are ready to face the challenge," Daphne said. Her voice was quiet, strangely serene. "Because you might be asked to sacrifice yourself and your friends in the pursuit of victory. And you must be ready for that, and not hesitate for so long that your opportunity is lost. For a leader of the Light, there is nothing harder than sending others out to die for you. Indeed, that is the difference between you and Voldemort's kind. They do not value life, in any form. Dark families may join you, because they cannot live with wholesale slaughter, even of Muggles. Those that can will not join you. They will view your compassion as a sign of weakness."

"Then I must let them go, and teach them the error of their ways," Harry said. "If they cannot abide by that rule, and truly believe in it, then what use are they to me? If you act and think as the enemy does, then you become the enemy."

"Wise words," Daphne replied. "And truer words were never spoken. In the end, titles and names don't matter. It is our actions that define us. If you become like Voldemort, then there will be little difference between his rule and yours, and others that might have fought beside you will instead fight against you. And if the wizarding world is divided into more than two sides, then the battle will be long, hard, bloody, and ultimately catastrophic. Wizarding Wars never last long because there are so few of us in the world. Prolonged warfare would do

irreparable harm to our numbers, and not even the most evil of wizards wish to see our kind wiped out.”

“That’s the last thing they want,” Harry agreed. “If he didn’t have a legion of followers to worship him, and a conquered people to rule over, he wouldn’t have won anything. Nothing is to be gained by destroying the wizarding world. Then Muggles are all that remain, and he believes wizards should rule Muggles.”

“What about the egg?” Daphne asked, abruptly changing the topic. “Have you gotten any closer to figuring it out?”

Harry groaned. He’d been stymied by the latest clue, and after several attempts knew only that he never wanted to open the damn thing in public again. Snape had made several harsh, if possibly deserved, comments about the disturbance that had caused in middle of the Slytherin Common Room. The ear-splitting screech that had nearly deafened him and Ginny wasn’t one to be soon forgotten, and he still got a few irritated looks. “You know what it is, don’t you?”

Daphne smiled evilly. “Of course I do,” she said. “But I’m not going to tell you. It’s something you should be able to figure out on your own, and I’m fairly certain that Maxime and Karkaroff feel the same way.”

“Can’t you at least give me a hint?” Harry pleaded.

Daphne shook her head. “It’s really not that difficult, Harry. I’m very confident in your abilities to figure it out.”

“Thanks a lot,” he groaned under his breath.

Hermione Granger deposited about a half-dozen heavy books on the library table with a satisfying “thump.” They covered a large variety of subjects, from useful household charms to a book on the greatest witches and wizards of the Dark Ages. For once, this didn’t involve homework. Madam Pince trusted her to return all of her books, eventually, so she rarely insisted that Hermione return them in any specific amount of time. She had a few hours to herself after lunch, with Harry in the middle of a private Potions lesson with Snape and Ginny spending some time with Fred and George, likely planning all

sorts of mayhem. A few years ago the idea might have appalled her, but she'd since learned that creating intricate, but harmless, pranks was encoded in the Weasley family's DNA.

She opened *Madam Fisher's Guide to Household Charms*, a fairly old copy at that. She'd been interested in learning about how Mrs. Weasley created the magic that washed dishes and did the laundry for her for quite some time, but with her increased workload and helping Harry with the Tournament she hadn't had the time. She figured she'd browse all of the books and mark sections she'd want to examine in greater detail when she had the time. When she wasn't too tired, Hermione liked to read for about an hour before she went to bed. It calmed her mind.

She thumbed through the first few pages, stopping at the table of contents and noting a few specific passages. The book was well worn, indicating that it had been both heavily used and a part of the Hogwarts library for quite a while. She noted the page numbers of the sections about washing dishes and clothing.

Then she heard it. It was a sound that she had grown to hate more than nails sliding across a chalkboard. The collection of airy voices and annoying giggles that indicated the presence of Viktor Krum...and the gaggle of girls that followed him everywhere. For some reason Krum always chose the table adjacent to hers. She clenched her teeth and tried to read the words on the page, but nothing got through. All she could focus on was the giggles and stupid *girly* comments about Krum's physique, whispered in perfectly audible voices by those that made her ashamed to be of the fairer sex. It was *maddening*. It took much of her self-control to not get up and calmly hex all of them to the Hospital Wing. But that wouldn't reflect well on her permanent record, she decided.

The presence of these girls also made it hard for her to feel sorry for Krum. Harry had told her about their conversation, and she supposed she did pity him for failing to live up to the expectations he was forced to endure, both at the Quidditch World Cup and during the First Task when he'd been the only champion to fail to retrieve the Golden Egg. Since it was vital to his preparation for the next task, it had been given to him. He'd only suffered in the points standings. Harry's

scores had been the strangest of the bunch. Some, like Daphne, Dumbledore, Crouch, and Bagman had been impressed by his perseverance and power. Maxime and Karkaroff had unsurprisingly scored him low, on the basis of the injuries he'd sustained.

Injuries that had come damn close to killing him.

Hermione knew that she needed to let go of that fact and look forward to the next Task, starting by helping Harry figure out what the screech from Hell that was emitted each time he opened the egg actually meant. She knew that she needed to internalize the expectation that Harry wasn't going to play it safe, and that she needed to accept his reasons for that, and support his choices...well, most of them. The ones that weren't entirely suicidal.

She'd spent quite a bit of time trying to understand her motives and feelings concerning Harry's actions. She'd come down to a few basic motivations.

First, she didn't want to see Harry hurt, or worse, killed. That was a pretty reasonable wish, she decided, but the problem was that it tended to shoot to the top of the priority list. And she had learned in the last few years that even if she did try to protect him, he wasn't going to let her hold him down. If there was something that he felt needed to be done, he was going to do it, in spite of her protests. Part of her motivation for trying to fix this was that she feared losing him in another sense: losing his friendship.

This was where things got complicated. She'd been rather upset when she'd finally realized how often she resented Ginny's relationship with Harry, one that had grown stronger and stronger even as the one between her and Harry had been strained by their disagreements. But she'd come to the conclusion that those two developments weren't directly related. Harry was more than willing to have both of them as close friends, and Hermione was happy to have Ginny as part of the group. The strain that she'd placed on her valued relationship was her fault, not Ginny's. Well, maybe, to an extent, it was also Harry's, but she really didn't have much control over that.

Hermione hated being alone. And she knew that feeling all too well. She'd never been accepted during her Muggle schooling, having

been identified as a bookworm and avoided like the plague, especially by the other girls. She'd struggled to find acceptance at Hogwarts too, until she'd become friends with Harry. Now, despite the fact that her friendship with Harry did quite a bit to isolate her from the other Gryffindors, she clung to him like a lifeline. He was one of the only people who accepted her for what she was, and embraced the bookish personality that had driven others away. Well, there were some Ravenclaws, but she didn't know them that well, and she certainly didn't have the shared experiences with them that she did with Harry. She'd stared down death at his side more than once, and that formed a kind of bond that could never be truly broken.

Still, they did have their misunderstandings. Such as the one she feared now existed, the one that might make Harry come to the conclusion that Hermione desperately wanted him to ask *her* to the Ball.

Hermione sighed. She hadn't been entirely clear, she supposed. Of course, she believed she'd been clear enough for most people to understand she was practically begging Harry to invite Ginny, but Harry didn't seem to understand. Ginny was far too skittish and stubborn to ask Harry herself, and terrified of what would happen if he didn't want to. She could see both sides of the puzzle, and saw that they fit together perfectly. Both wanted the same thing, but both were afraid to ask the other. Hence, Hermione tried to help Harry along...with potentially troubling results.

She wanted him to be happy. She wanted Ginny to be happy, too. They'd both been through a lot, and they deserved it. And she believed that she did as well, considering all she had experienced since she'd become a part of the magical world. She just wasn't sure how she could do that. She always felt content when pouring over thick, obscure books to learn everything she could, yet there was still something missing. Maybe she'd find it. Maybe she wouldn't.

What she *did* know for certain was that she wasn't going to accomplish anything of any significance if she stayed where she was. Somehow, she might not have noticed Krum's girls as much had they been yelling instead of excitedly whispering to each other. She began to pack up her books, frustrated that she couldn't find peace and

quiet where she normally did, when she felt someone standing over her. Strangely enough, the girls had suddenly gone silent. Curious, she looked up.

Krum was standing there, and he was practically radiating anxiety and worry. She sat there, staring back at him, bewildered and hopelessly confused. He tried to say something, but she couldn't understand him through his thick accent. He'd also mangled her name. "Come again?" she said.

"I vas vondering...vould you like to go to ze ball vith me?"

Time practically stood still for a moment as Hermione's normally active brain went blank, then tried to process the words that Krum had just spoken. When she did, she was so shocked that she wasn't sure how to respond. She could decline; indeed, she almost wanted to...but she felt sorry for him, now, and based on how nervous he looked at the moment, eyes practically pleading with her, she simply couldn't bring herself to...besides, he was rather good looking... "I..." she began, "...yes. Yes, I would. I'd be honored."

Krum smiled nervously. "Thank you. I've been...vanting to ask you for some time now, but...vell, I've been vatching you and..."

"It's alright," she said, laughing. "I'll go with you."

"Thank you," he said. She could practically feel the other girls glaring daggers into her back as they whispered disparaging comments, but for the moment, she ignored it. She could enjoy her triumph later. With that, he gave a slight bow, and left. The girls lingered, but eventually followed him out.

Her mind spinning, Hermione sat back hard in her chair. *Viktor Krum just asked me to go to the ball with him. Viktor Krum, the world's youngest professional Seeker or whatever it was, actually likes me. He chose me...*

She was aware that, based on her normal behavior and attitudes, she ought to be disgusted by her reaction, but somehow she couldn't bring herself to recognize that.

She also realized that she had the perfect way to defuse the situation between her and Harry. If Harry knew she were going to with Krum, that might make him understand that she never wanted to go with him in the first place...well, she wouldn't have minded, but that she wanted him to ask Ginny all along.

Suddenly, her day was looking much, much better.

"Potter."

"Greengrass."

It was how most, if not all of their meetings began. They were almost always alone, somewhere in the depths of the castle. They exchanged surnames in greeting and then they sparred verbally, with the Pureblood heiress practically grading his developing skills and approach. This time, however, seemed to be different.

"I'm going to get right to the point, Potter," she said. "You know that my father is interested in the possibility of forming an alliance with you, against my own advice."

"Of course," Harry said.

"Traditionally, alliances in the Pureblood community are built upon mutual trust and benefit. As is the case with almost all alliances, regardless of size. My father has decided, presumably as a result of your inexperience, to make the first move. I am to invite you to a certain ceremony, one that takes place on the 22th of December. Your guardian is also welcome to attend, although my father believes she will not."

"What's the celebration called?" Harry asked. He felt foolish asking, but he knew of several different rituals traditionally practiced on or around the Winter Solstice.

"In this case, it is known as *Karachun*," she replied. "I wouldn't be surprised if you hadn't heard of it. It's part of an old Slavic festival recognizing the triumph of Dark over Light. Despite its terrific symbolism, few British families observe it. My mother's family has

roots in the Ukraine; distant, but it's still a part of my heritage. My father chose to keep the tradition alive after she died. I suppose he is honoring her that way. There will be others there, Potter, others that might choose to support you when the time comes for the sides to be drawn."

"I will be there," he promised. "I'll be prepared."

"Good," Greengrass said. "I have a busy day ahead of me, so forgive me if I cut this short. Discuss this with your guardian; my father insists that you have her approval. However, no one else is welcome. If you were to try to bring Weasley or Granger, the consequences would be...unfortunate."

There was no need for her to elaborate. This was a sacred rite, and it had probably been established long ago that only Pureblooded witches and wizards were allowed to attend. Harry couldn't fight the forces of tradition. He would need to embrace them if he were to gain trust and support, even of those that believed in old, bigoted rules. Eventually, he would have to force them to work together with those they might consider inferior. But there was no need to attempt that now.

"I understand," Harry replied. "I will talk with my guardian. But tell your father that I will do everything in my power to ensure that I am there. Where will the ceremony take place?"

"That will be revealed to you once you confirm that you are coming. My father will send you a letter that includes the location. You should be very honored, Potter. My father does not trust easily, and by inviting you, he is showing a great deal more faith in you than I possess."

"Then I will do my best not to disappoint him."

Greengrass didn't respond, and they went their separate ways.

Harry wasn't exactly pleased to see Hermione running toward him as he headed back across the Quidditch pitch towards the locker room. Flitwick had taken ill again, and he'd cancelled his classes for the

next few days. With a few hours before dinner, he'd gone flying in an effort to clear his mind so that he could figure out how to best handle the situation with the Ball. He didn't want to hurt either one of his friends, but that was a distinct possibility if he acted, or didn't act. It was a most frustrating and confusing situation, but one that he had to deal with, or he might be down two friends. But he'd barely begun to think about it when the need to make a decision began dashing in his direction. "Harry," she called. Her voice was unusually excited, and she was smiling. "You won't believe what just happened," she said, stopping right next to him, trying to catch her breath.

"What?" he asked, even more confused by her behavior.

"I've been looking all over for you, by the way. I missed you at dinner last night."

"I know, Snape kept Moon and I late. We had to prepare the ingredients for our next lesson. What's got you so excited?"

"I was just asked to the Ball...by Viktor Krum." Hermione looked like she might burst with joy at that moment. He was stunned by that revelation, but knew that if he just stood there, open-mouthed, she wouldn't take it well.

"That's great," he blurted, not knowing what else to do. "Really, great." He flashed her a smile. "When did he ask you?"

"Just now, in the library," she replied. "He seemed rather nervous about the whole thing, really. Honestly, I thought he was going to keel over after I didn't respond immediately. I still can't believe it. You're fine with it, of course."

"Of course," Harry replied immediately, fearing the consequences if he didn't. He liked Krum, felt he was a decent person and even felt sorry for him when he failed to live up to expectations, though he was still floored by the revelation that he would choose Hermione, above everyone else, to accompany him to the Ball. It was nothing against his friend, but, well...he didn't really think she measured up to most of the older girls in...a number of areas. Whatever Krum saw in her, it was something deeper than superficial attraction. That had to be a good thing, right?

"I wasn't sure I was even going to go to the Ball with anyone, until today," she continued. "Thank Merlin I bought a nice set of dress robes. They look good on me, right?"

"Uh...yeah. Yeah, they looked great," said Harry quickly, trying to recall when he ever saw Hermione in her new dress robes.

"I suppose I really shouldn't be asking *you* about that. You're my friend, so you're hardly going to say I looked terrible. And, no offense Harry, you aren't exactly a fashion critic."

"None taken," he assured her. "I'm really happy for you." And he was. Hermione tended to be ignored by her peers, to be overlooked because she kept to herself, had succeeded in alienating her entire house, and came off as a know-it-all show off. It was good that someone had finally seen past that. That it was Viktor Krum made it all the better, and he was certain this would do a lot for her self-esteem. At least, that's what he hoped. This also meant that he didn't have to feel guilty about inviting Ginny to the ball instead of Hermione. Indeed, he was starting to wonder if that's what Hermione had in mind from the beginning. Considering how pleased she was to be invited by someone else, it seemed less likely that she had ever desperately wanted anything more than what they had in the first place. That made him feel considerably better, even if she couldn't know.

"By the way, have you figured out who you are going to take?" she asked. Her impatience was blatant, and she made little effort to hide it.

"Ginny," he said. "I'm going to ask Ginny."

Hermione grinned. "Excellent. She'll be thrilled, Harry, really. She hasn't said as much to me, but I can tell that she was hoping you'd take her. She won't be able to go otherwise. She was worried about that."

"Do you want me to tell Ginny the good news?" Harry asked. "Or would you rather do it yourself?"

"Go ahead," Hermione told him. "I don't have any need to keep this a secret. Bloody hell, I'm going to *flaunt* it."

At that moment, Harry began to wonder once again if he'd ever understand those bizarre and foreign creatures known as girls.

Ginny Weasley was just leaving her afternoon Transfiguration class, wondering how on earth she was going to get her essay done for tomorrow's class, when she was stopped by a familiar voice calling her name. It was Harry.

"Yes?" she replied, letting her classmates pass by. Colin Creevey lingered a bit, trying to catch a glimpse of his childhood idol, but a glare from her sent him scurrying away. Harry ran up to her and stopped, panting a bit.

"Ginny, I wanted to talk to you, er...I wanted to ask you something," he said, rushing through his words.

She laughed. "What is it that you felt the need to run halfway across the castle to ask?"

"Would you go to the Ball with me?" he asked, calming his voice slightly.

Ginny was floored. But she was uncertain. She needed to make sure she understood the situation. Secretly, she'd been hoping for this to happen for some time, but she'd come to realize that it might not happen after all. That it was possibly that Harry didn't return the affection she thought she felt for him. He didn't really show many signs of it...well, not obvious ones. She'd tried not to get her hopes up, only to have them dashed. "As friends?" she asked.

"Well, I guess." He seemed disappointed and yet relieved, somehow. "Not necessarily, but that would depend on what you were comfortable with."

"No, no, I'd love to go with you...really. But I mean, are we going as friends or...something else."

"Something else, maybe?" Harry asked. "I don't know, Ginny. I don't understand in any way, shape, or form how this is supposed to work."

I just...I feel something for you, Ginny. I really like you. More than a friend probably should. I..."

She laughed again, this time out of her own nervousness. She didn't want to mess this up, or leave him with the wrong impression. His expression was already losing the enthusiasm he'd initially had. "I'm sorry, Ginny. I didn't mean to..."

"Would you shut up already?" she asked. "Merlin, Harry, for the future savior of the wizarding world, you are terrible when it comes to asking girls out...but, since this is your first try, I'll cut you some slack. And, just so you don't feel awkward about the whole thing, I'll let you in on a secret." She felt her cheeks redden a bit, but she plowed on, knowing that if she didn't, this thing could end in disaster before it even had a chance. Normally, she might have waited, but she felt that she couldn't. For Harry's sake. "I feel the same way. I really, really, *really* like you, Harry. I think about you all the time. And I'd be thrilled to go to the Ball with you."

"Ginny," he said, still sounding anxious. "We can't rush this. With everything that's going on, with all we've been through and will go through, we can't just blindly rush into this. That's a recipe for disaster. We'll go to the ball together, and see what happens, then decide if we want to go further. Is that okay with you?"

It wasn't exactly what she'd been dreaming about. But, based on what she knew about Harry, it wasn't exactly surprising, either. And she understood the logic behind it. She loved Harry's friendship. She didn't know yet if she was in love with Harry. She wasn't even sure that was possible at their age. So it didn't make sense to risk everything to get something that might or might not exist. If they took this slowly, they might be able to back out and remain good friends even if things didn't work out between them. For now, it was a victory. "Okay, then we'll just be friends until the Yule Ball. After that...we'll see how things go. You're right. We shouldn't rush into this."

"Thank you for understanding," he said, quietly. "I knew you would. I'd love for this to turn into something even better, and lasting, Ginny. But I just don't know, and I suspect you don't either. It doesn't make any sense to gamble our friendship on something like that."

“What about Hermione?” Ginny asked.

Harry smiled. “That’s taken care of, at least now. Viktor Krum asked her.”

Ginny grinned. “I knew he liked her. I knew it.”

“You did?”

“It comes with being a girl,” she said. “You should try it sometime.”

“No. Thanks, but I’m happy being an oblivious boy.”

They stared at each other, then burst out laughing. Ginny was about as happy as she’d been in years.

“What do you think?”

Daphne sighed, closing her eyes for a moment. “She’s right, Harry. It *is* quite an honor. But I’m afraid that I can’t go with you. My family heritage forbids it. Light families have their own counterpart that takes place during the Summer Solstice. I don’t observe it, but since I’m pledged to the Light, I don’t have the option of choosing which one I want to observe. I see no problem in allowing you to observe it, although I’m going to have to place a great deal of trust in Aiden. Trust I didn’t know I had.”

“But you’ll allow me to attend?”

“Yes, I will,” she said. “This is a very important stage in alliance-building. Aiden introduced the idea, now it’s up to both of you to make something of it. By inviting you to witness this type of ceremony, he’s showing a great deal of faith in you. I trust that you can take care of yourself if any minor problems arise. Anything more than that, and, well, I won’t exactly hesitate to make an appearance. Wear the ring. I’ll be able to track you down if things get rough. I don’t expect them to, but you never know.”

“Alright,” Harry agreed. He hadn’t been keeping it with him recently. Somehow, Daphne’s constant presence wasn’t exactly comforting. It

was almost smothering, and he didn't like the feeling. And Daphne hadn't said anything about it until now. Harry supposed that she would understand his desire for independence. But because she was asking specifically, he'd put that aside for now. "I've done some research on the ritual in question. It's a pretty rare one. But from what I've learned, I understand your reasons for not attending. It's a ceremony that I doubt Light wizards would approve of."

"Of course they wouldn't," Daphne said. "First, it involves calling to dead ancestors, something that Light wizards don't believe in. For example, what have you been taught about magical Ghosts such as Nearly-Headless Nick?"

"Dead wizards only become ghosts if they are afraid of death, most often because they feel they have left something unfinished or made mistakes they have yet to atone for. But that's not the way that *everyone* looks at them, is it?"

"No, it isn't. Most Dark families have the utmost reverence for the dead, and above all ghosts, as "living" embodiments of the other side, as it were. The Bloody Baron is looked upon as a role model, although I think it's safe to say he never really embraced that, but he's respected and feared. On the other hand, Nearly-Headless Nick is looked upon as a bit of a pitiful curiosity. The Grey Lady is also respected, but more by the children than the adults. The Fat Friar might be even more of a caricature. My point is that Dark families practically worship their ancestors. A number of their rituals, including this one, seek to call upon the magic and/or the "soul," for lack of a better term, of departed family members. I've never witnessed one in person, but I've heard stories. The kind of stories that seem difficult to believe, until you consider the source."

"Wow," Harry replied. "I think I understand why these ceremonies are so personal. And why it's so remarkable that Aiden has extended an invitation to me, a complete outsider."

"Yes," Daphne replied. "I must say I'm quite surprised. Pleased, but surprised nonetheless. I wouldn't have expected things to move this quickly, but it's for the best. You have a lot of work ahead of you, and

I feel that I can trust Aiden's motives, if nothing else. His hatred of Voldemort is complete."

"You can relate to him, I suppose."

"Absolutely," Daphne said, "as you can. To intentionally perform any action that might work to his benefit would be to betray the memory of those he took away from Aiden. His older daughter and wife were precious to him, and I can tell that he still mourns them to this day."

Harry decided not to add, *just as you mourn your own lost loved ones*. He wasn't sure if he really *mourned* his parents. Daphne had been there for him, had filled the role of mother to the best of her ability. Perhaps Lily might have done a better job, and Harry had no doubt that Daphne believed that to be so, but he could never know. He'd barely known his parents when they'd been taken from him. His memories were faded and fragmented, composed of sounds, smells, brief flashes of visual memory that made little sense and told him almost nothing about Lily and James Potter as individual human beings. What he'd heard from others had been tainted by the passing of years and the remnants of old grudges and close friendships. As such, it was difficult for Harry to think of his parents as people. They were almost legends in their own right, dead for so long that the obscure details, the quirks, habits, and mannerisms that really separated one person from another had been lost.

"And the other families?" Harry asked.

Daphne shrugged. "If Aiden is telling the truth about believing you to be the best hope of defeating Voldemort, and as far as I can tell, he is, I am confident that he will not allow you to come to harm. He won't invite anyone that might have loyalties to Voldemort, or that might mean you harm. I'll be fascinated to hear the details when you return, although it's possible he might order you to keep whatever you see secret. I'd understand if he did. But I'd love to find out more about these rituals. There isn't much literature on them, and the resources that exist are vague and general. These types of rituals vary widely by family, and it seems to be an unwritten rule that the specific practices of each family are kept secret."

Harry considered that. He also considered that he'd need to tell Ginny and Hermione about this soon, so that he'd have time to explain this completely. He thought they'd go along with it. Hermione seemed to be resigned to the fact that he was going to do things she considered unwise, despite her objections. He'd prefer that she see things the way he did, but perhaps there was value in having a friend that served as his personal devil's advocate, to warn him away from his more foolish endeavors. And she was a good friend, and that was what really mattered. It would take many disagreements to make him forget the way she'd risked everything and stuck with him during their first two years at Hogwarts, moving past her Gryffindor identity to not only become close friends, but willingly following him into fire, sometimes literally.

"The next time I run into Greengrass, I'll give her my answer," he said. "Now, onto something else. I'm still trying to figure out what is going on with the egg, and I'm no closer than when I began. Hermione's gone through the entire bloody library, but she's determined that it isn't a banshee or anything else that shrieks."

Daphne smiled. "Perhaps you aren't looking for the right thing, then. Consider that while you perceive it to be a shriek, it might not be that to another."

"Banshees have mating calls," he reminded her. "But that doesn't help me. I think I've established that the noise it makes is *universally* perceived as an ear-splitting shriek by normal humans. The bloody thing might rupture the eardrums of a deaf man."

"Then consider the medium."

"Air?" Harry asked. "How does that help me?"

Daphne smiled. She was clearly enjoying this. "You figure it out. I've given you quite a bit of help."

"As it's still completely useless," Harry reminded her. "I still have absolutely no idea what created the sound, let alone how it provides a clue for the next task. And at this point, I'm close to just forgetting about the egg and going into the Second Task blind. I'm not sure I can stand that sound another dozen times."

“I’d recommend against that approach,” his guardian warned. “The reason you are being given a clue is because the demands of the Second Task cannot be met without specific preparation. In the interests of your safety, I’m not going to allow you to give up on the egg.”

“But you won’t give me the answer either.”

“No,” she said. “I’m not going to do your work for you. The answer is much, much simpler than you think it is. In fact, the answer isn’t all that far away from the castle. Keep at it, you’ll get there eventually.”

Harry wished he had as much confidence. Then again, if it was written anywhere in any book, Hermione would surely be able to track it down.

Four days after Harry had delivered his answer to Daphne Greengrass, her father’s message finally arrived. It was delivered during breakfast by a peregrine falcon, a rare and extremely hard to domesticate bird that he knew from his friend Tanner was found only in the eastern part of North America. How Aiden Greengrass had managed to acquire and tame one was a mystery. Ginny and Hermione were both impressed by the magnificent bird, which seemed remarkably intelligent as it eyed him, as if seeing for himself if he was trustworthy before it stuck out its leg. After a few seconds the Falcon raised its head allowing Harry to remove the roll of parchment that had been tied on with simple twine.

He unrolled the message, and read.

Harry,

I’m entrusting this message to Aegis, and since he’s never failed me before, I’m reasonably certain that it will reach you. Daphne has informed me that you have accepted my invitation to the Karachun ceremony on the 22nd of December. For reasons of security, I’m not going to tell you where exactly the ceremony will take place. Although it is not particularly dangerous, the Ministry has decided that it’s borderline necromancy. Personally, I feel that attempting to temporarily recall the spirit or soul of a person is far different from

trying to reanimate the body, but I don't make the laws. All that is required of you is that you make your way to the shore of the Lake around an hour before midnight. You will be met there, and brought to the primary site.

If you are still willing, please state so on the other side of the parchment, and attach it to Aegis.

I hope to see you then.

Sincerely,

Aiden Greengrass

Quickly, Harry scribbled an affirmative on the other side of the parchment, then re-attached it to Aegis's leg. He noticed Daphne Greengrass some distance away, giving a small nod of approval. The falcon took flight, and Harry watched it soar into the air and out of the Great Hall, bound for Cornwall.

A/N: Ah, we inch closer to the Yule Ball, as well as the Karachun Ceremony, which I still haven't really figured out yet. I've got some ideas, but I'll likely be taking a lot of liberties. That's fine when you are filling in holes, versus changing canon. I'm hole-filling.

This is, without question, the lightest chapter I've ever written. Parts of it are downright funny. Harry's bafflement, which mirrors my own at times, about the behavior and emotions of girls is particularly amusing. That it carries over to Krum is also funny, and fairly realistic. The Krum I've created is sort of overwhelmed by his fame, trying to be a normal young wizard in the face of tremendous expectations. He's learning to cope with failure, better now than later. Fortunately, Hermione accepted, so he didn't have to deal with that variety of failure.

The next chapter, entitled "Tainted Yule" is going to be very busy, featuring an escalation of the hostility between Draco and Harry, the Karachun Ceremony, the Yule Ball itself and events surrounding it, and a bit of a cliffie at the end. Draco and Harry's problems will be

essentially settled before the first task...in rather spectacular fashion. Harry is coming into his own, becoming more self-reliant and willing to stand up for himself. That's essential, because next year, he's going to be cast adrift in a hostile environment more than once, and he'll need to deal with it.

Ron's character really isn't going to see a tremendous amount of development until the next book. The same with Tonks. And Harry's close circle of friends and acquaintances will essentially remain closed until he's forced to let more people in. People that have a reason to listen to him.

It's a long ways off, but I had a series of great ideas for the 6th part of this series, so I'm looking forward to using them. Although at the rate these things are growing, that might take a while. I'm kind of trying for approximately two 9000-10000 word chapters per month, working around my and my beta's schedules.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter 15: Tainted Yule

With all of our magic, you'd think the Hogwarts staff might show the slightest interest in preventing us freezing to death out here.

Ginny Weasley pulled her scarf and coat closer to her body, trying to shield herself from the bitter cold of the Scottish winter. The snow continued to fall, blanketing the ground and the hundreds of students trudging down to Hogsmeade village. Christmas was less than a week away, and most of the students planned to use this opportunity to buy gifts for family and friends.

Ginny was no different, though her funds were rather limited. Her family's relative poverty had always been a constant fact of life for her, and she tried to help by making herself as little of a burden as possible. She had accepted secondhand books, clothing, and other items graciously and appreciated what she had. Her siblings all reacted differently to the family's financial status. Percy just tried to forget about the whole thing as he strove to make his ambitions reality, the Twins constantly looked for ways to exploit their remarkable and unusual talents to make a few galleons, and Ron was rather resentful of the whole thing. He wasn't alone, though. Charlie had behaved much the same way at the same age, but he'd risen above that. Bill, the most successful of the current generation of Weasleys (to date, at least) had become determined to overcome it.

Recently, of course, Ginny's normally frugal approach had changed a bit. On top of the new broom that she had convinced her parents to buy her if and when she made the Slytherin Quidditch team, she now needed dress robes. And not just any dress robes, but nice ones. This entire thing meant so much to her.

So she'd sent a letter home, using a spell that Hermione had taught her to ensure that her parents were the only ones who opened it. In that letter, she'd explained Harry's invitation and, in terms that she knew her mother would completely understand, how she felt about it. It was a tremendous relief for her, and also, she thought, for Harry. Both had felt something for the other for some time, but neither one had been willing to risk admitting it. Ginny had been getting close to asking Harry herself when he'd finally marshaled up the courage.

Initially, she'd been thrilled. Even Harry's request that they take it slowly and see if it would work before rushing into things wasn't enough to dim her enthusiasm. Because somehow, she *knew* that it would work. She told her mother this, and then asked them to give her the money to buy a formal gown. She knew that she was asking a lot. She knew that those sorts of things cost money the Weasley family barely had. She had held out hope that her acceptance of their situation throughout her childhood might have given her a little slack.

Her parents' response had come back in just a few days. She had been fairly certain that they would approve of a possible relationship between her and Harry, especially if it was for the right reasons and they took a mature approach. Her fears to the contrary had proven to be unfounded. Her mother had been extremely pleased for her, and praised both of them for having the maturity to take things slowly. Her father had also approved, not that Ginny would have declined Harry's invitation if they hadn't, of course, but it helped her self-confidence. She knew that her brothers wouldn't be nearly so accepting, at least not the ones still at Hogwarts. It had taken them long enough to accept her placement in Slytherin, and longer until they'd stopped blaming Harry for that happening in the first place. But her mother's letter had also contained some bad news: they simply couldn't spare the money to buy her the kind of gown she wanted. However, her mother had promised that she'd found a compromise, one that she was very certain her daughter would be content with. In this case, Ginny had decided to trust the wisdom of her mother, who probably knew her better than anyone else in the world. As the only women in the Weasley household, they were natural allies. So Ginny would trust in her wisdom, and hope for the best. Something else that gave her hope was that her mother had outright refused to entrust the parcel she was sending to the tired, decrepit family owl, Errol, and had instead paid for a post office owl.

On either side of her, Harry and Hermione struggled through the snow.

Harry's heavy robes were drenched from melted snow and he was visibly straining through the howling wind. "You know, you'd think they might let those Threstrals do the work in weather like this," he grunted through his teeth.

"You know as well as I do that they aren't native to cold environments," Hermione replied. "They live in Eastern Europe, but they hibernate during the winter. They aren't much better suited to this than we are."

Harry didn't respond to that.

Scattered around them were other groups of students, mostly from Hogwarts, although Ginny could see a number of Durmstrang students in their heavy, fur coats. Of everyone here, they were probably the most accustomed to this sort of activity. The opposite was true of the few Beauxbatons students that had decided to brave the cold. They looked miserable in their light robes. Harry speculated that the school was located in Southern France, which made a lot of sense considering the Beauxbatons students' obvious dislike of cold temperatures.

They were about halfway there, but Ginny was beginning to wonder if she was going to make it. She was exhausted and was rapidly losing the feeling in her hands and feet, despite her mother's thick woolen mittens and socks. Her face stung from the freezing temperatures, despite all she did to conceal every inch of skin with her hat and muffler. She shivered violently, mentally cursing the snow. Then, abruptly, she felt a wonderful wave of heat wash over her, spreading over every inch of her body and practically blocking out the cold. She looked around and saw Harry returning his wand to his holster, underneath the sleeves of his heavily robes. "Warming charm," he explained, yelling over the howling of the wind. "I was a bit nervous about using it because I'm so new to it, but you looked like you needed help. And, no offense, Hermione, but I knew you weren't going to do it because you were afraid of lighting all three of us on fire."

Hermione's cheeks, already pink from the cold, darkened a little in embarrassment. Harry seemed to realize what he had said hadn't come out that well. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean-"

"I'll forgive you if you do the same to me," she cut him off. He did exactly that, then used it on himself. Insulated from the cold, the three

friends managed to beat the majority of their fellow students into the village.

They ducked into the Three Broomsticks, and sat down at a table. Harry ordered three Butterbeers and they consumed them quickly, allowing the warm liquid to rejuvenate their tired bodies. All three had things to do, so they decided to split up and return in a few hours, which ought to be long enough to complete their Christmas shopping. Hermione, of course, had already finished ordering presents for her friends, no doubt books from Flourish and Blotts. Ginny had created a mental Christmas list for her close friends and siblings. Even Ron. After the fearsome tirade from her mother when he'd failed to get her something the previous year, he'd learned his lesson.

Ginny was very conflicted when it came to Ron. There were times that she hated him, hated being related to him. But most of the time, when she calmed down and looked at it rationally, she loved him. He was her brother. There were even a few times when they were both much younger that he'd played with her, and defended her from their older brothers. And she knew that, no matter how awful his methods, he had her best interests at heart. He was just too bloody stupid to understand that she was where she was supposed to be, doing what she wanted to do. Eventually, she knew, that truth would penetrate even *his* thick skull. It just was taking far too long.

Once Harry paid for their drinks (he insisted, since Hermione had done it the previous time,) they split up. Neither one of them ever asked Ginny to pay for anything, or even expected her to. And while they were trying to help her, it did emphasize her own financial situation. But they meant well, so she could forgive them. Especially this time, because the money she'd saved was going to be spent on gifts for her friends.

But Ginny's first stop was the post office. The students were beginning to take over the town, but Ginny managed to get through the arriving masses and inside without much trouble. She walked up to the counter and dug three Knuts out of her purse, the standard fee for receiving a parcel. An elderly worker with kind blue eyes, and a weathered face took the coins and asked for her name.

“Ginny Weasley,” she replied. The man got up and headed into the back of the building. A minute later, he returned with a large parcel.

“Took two owls to carry this item,” the man said. “Nothing out of the ordinary, of course. We offer the holiday discount for the season. No extra charge for the additional owl. Lots of big packages being delivered at this time of year.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking the package from him. The man nodded, and Ginny headed for the exit. The urge to rip open the package and see what her mother had sent her was overwhelming. She decided to at least wait until she got to Gladrags, where she could use one of the dressing rooms to try it on. She had a good feeling about the contents.

“Well, well, well, what do we have here?” Hermione Granger shouldn’t have been in this position. On practically any other Hogsmeade Weekend, she would have spent any time that she had to herself holed up in the bookstore. The problem was that the same store was packed to the gills with late Christmas shoppers, and the noise and number of people moving up and down the aisles had been enough to drive her away. Instead, she’d decided to come out here, to the Shrieking Shack, where she’d hoped she’d find a bit of peace and quiet. But the cold had proven too much, and she’d been about to head back into town when she heard the arrogant tones of Draco Malfoy from behind her. Initially, she didn’t turn around.

“I’m talking to *you*, Mudblood. What, did Potter and the Weaslette abandon you? Did they leave you all alone out here while they went somewhere else to snog?”

Hermione continued to ignore him, but she subtly dug into her pocket and wrapped her half-frozen fingers around her wand. She was quite aware of the fact that Malfoy’s muscled goons, Crabbe and Goyle, were probably present and left her outnumbered. She’d like to think that Malfoy wouldn’t be stupid enough to assault a fellow student, but she wouldn’t allow herself that luxury. It would be giving him too much credit. Slowly, she turned around. “Is there a point you’d like to make, Malfoy?” she asked, glaring at him defiantly. “Or are you just talking because actually taking action is beyond your capabilities. I have no

interest in speaking to you, either way.” She moved to walk back up the path, but the three Slytherins blocked her way.

“Potter’s getting rather full of himself,” Malfoy began.

“You don’t say,” Hermione interrupted. “I hadn’t noticed. I’ll, of course, address this with him right away. Thank you for your concern, Draco.”

“Listen, you,” Malfoy growled. “I don’t appreciate Potter trampling on my turf. Slytherin House belongs to *me*, to *my* family. Not some upstart Light Halfblood that was lucky to survive to see his second birthday. He’s baiting some pretty dangerous individuals, and you are right next to him on the firing range.”

“A Muggle expression? How unlike you? Get out of my way. I’ve no time for your empty threats. I don’t need to understand the inner workings of Slytherin to know that you are a joke. You’ve proved nothing.” Hermione crossed her arms over her chest, revealing her wand gripped in her gloved right hand. “I’m not afraid of you, and I’m hardly alone.”

“We’ll see about that,” he spat. “You’re a bright Mudblood, aren’t you, Granger? Surely you’re capable of simple arithmetic. There are three of us, and one of you. I’d say you were being a bit overconfident. Even if you *were* half the duelist I am, my friends don’t need magic to...ah, make a point.”

“I’m warning you, Malfoy.”

Draco laughed. “Warning me? *You* are warning *me*? A little backwards, don’t you think?” He advanced toward her. Hermione extended her wand toward him, stopping his advance.

“Stay back,” she ordered.

“You’d never risk it. You’d never risk getting thrown out of Hogwarts for attacking a student,” Draco said, sounding more confident than Hermione would want. And, truth be told, getting thrown out of Hogwarts was one of her worst nightmares.

"Maybe, maybe not," Hermione said indifferently. "Depends how badly I hurt you first." She was running through a number of different spells she might be able to use if it came to that. She considered loosing a Burning Curse, but she didn't want to risk it. Besides, she wasn't confident in her own ability to control it.

Draco drew his own wand with an unnecessary flourish. "Care to take me on, Granger? They'll be digging pieces of you out of the snow. Come on, let's see what you've got."

Hermione dropped into an approximation of a dueling stance, the best she could manage with all of the clothing she was wearing. She was a bit nervous now. She didn't know how skilled Draco was in dueling, and her own technique and approach left much to be desired, despite Harry's frequent compliments. She was making progress, but she had a lot of work to do. And she didn't want to really hurt Malfoy, no matter how much she hated him and what he stood for. She certainly didn't want to kill him. That left her at a serious disadvantage. She decided she'd let Malfoy make the first move. She wouldn't be baited into any kind of situation where she could claim she acted in self-defense. She saw a flicker of movement over Malfoy's shoulder.

"Get away from her," Harry bellowed, coming down behind Malfoy on the path, alone. Ginny didn't seem to have accompanied him. His eyes blazed with anger, and his wand was already drawn. "Back off, Malfoy," he repeated.

"Well, this looks like your lucky day, Granger. Harry Potter has come to save his damsel in distress," he said, smiling maliciously at her.

Harry walked directly up to Malfoy, staring at him directly in the face. "If you threaten my friends, then you will answer to me. You're scared of me, aren't you? I know that because you are using the tactics of a coward. You're trying to terrorize my friends to force me to back off. I'm not going to, and if you lay a finger on Hermione or Ginny I will make you pay for it."

Draco sneered at him. "You're all talk, Potter."

Harry's vicious uppercut was as much a surprise to Hermione as it was to Draco. It caught the Pureblood heir squarely in the jaw,

knocking him clear off his feet and into the snow. Harry had his wand on him in an instant, as he shook his left hand to dull the pain. "Don't even try it," he said to his helpless foe. "That's means you too," he said, meaning Crabbe and Goyle, who were sneaking up behind him. "Get out of my sight," he spat.

Draco unsteadily got to his feet, massaging his jaw. "Fighting like a *Muggle*," he hissed. "I expected better, even from *you*."

"Well then let that be a lesson to you. I'm not bigoted or stupid enough to forsake a perfectly effective strategy when it serves my needs," Harry replied. "Now leave."

Draco glared at him for another moment, and Harry's wand arm tensed. "Come on," he barked at his bodyguards. The three of them made their way back up the path and into Hogsmeade. "You'll pay for this, Potter. You won't get away with this."

"I'll be waiting for you," Harry shouted back. Once they were gone, he said, "Looks like I went looking for you at just the right time. I finished my shopping and sent the stuff ahead to Hogwarts, but I didn't find you in the bookstore. I decided to try here, since it seemed like the least logical place I could imagine, and you not being in the bookstore was highly illogical."

"I could have taken care on myself," Hermione protested.

Harry grimaced. "I hate to break it to you, Hermione, but that's simply not true."

Hermione glared at him, and then looked away, realizing he was right. "You're worried about him, aren't you?"

"He's just arrogant enough to be dangerous," Harry replied. "He knows his own weaknesses, yet he ignores them because he wants to be superior to others. He might do drastic, inadvisable things because he is afraid of seeing how weak and powerless he truly is. And knowing that, yes, I am concerning that he'll strike at you or Ginny to get at me."

"So you want us to be careful?"

Harry nodded. "Just watch your backs. Try not to wander around alone. Make it as difficult as possible for him to get at you. With luck, he'll see some sense and back off."

At twenty minutes to midnight on the predetermined evening, Harry Potter slipped out of his bed, donned his invisibility cloak, and snuck through the nearly deserted common room into the dungeons. He easily made his way into the Entrance Hall, and cast a quick Silencing Charm on the hinges of the massive oak doors of the entrance to slip into the night. Carefully, he made his way down the snow-covered path towards the lake, his pulse pounding in his ears. He didn't want to get caught on this night. When he was out of view of the castle, he removed the cloak and continued down to the water's edge. When he got there, he heard a noise and spun to see Daphne Greengrass, dressed in jet black robes, her long hair silver in the moonlight, emerging from the cover of some trees. The night air was frigid, but despite her relatively light attire, she wasn't shivering.

"Potter, you made it. Good."

Harry nodded as he moved closer to her. "Is your father going to meet us here?"

"Yes, but we are still waiting for one other."

Harry frowned. "Another student? Who?" He peered off, scanning the hillside for any dark shapes advancing toward them.

The question answered itself when a voice spoke out from the darkness, coming from Harry's right. "Me."

Harry spun and found himself staring into the dark eyes of Blaise Zabini.

"Neat trick," Daphne said.

"I don't understand," Harry said.

"It's a basic magical illusion," Greengrass explained. "He was coming toward us the entire time, but when we looked toward him, our eyes looked everywhere except when he was at the time."

Harry nodded, understanding. Zabini's father, if he remembered correctly, was an Illusionist, so it would make sense that he'd taught a few of the more basic skills to his son. "Zabini," he said in greeting. "Didn't expect to see you here. I didn't realize you were friends with Blaise's family."

"We aren't," Greengrass replied curtly. "At least, not yet. That's partially what this gathering is about. My father wants to bring together several important individuals and form the basis of an alliance against Voldemort within the ranks of the Dark Purebloods. You were invited, Harry, for two reasons. First, despite your family's Light history, you may yet choose the Dark, and second, you appear most likely to be the leader in this next war, wise or not. You should be there as alliances are cemented. The third family, that we will meet at the location, is an old friend of ours. They have three children, all home-schooled. All of them are skilled and powerful witches and wizards. I do not believe that you have met them before tonight."

Harry shook his head. It didn't sound familiar. "Are many Wizarding children home-schooled?"

"More than you'd think," Blaise replied. "A lot of pureblood parents, especially Dark purebloods, don't trust Hogwarts or any of the other European Magical schools. They'd rather select their children's curriculum and have it taught to them by private tutors. They come out pretty well, and often far better prepared."

As Blaise finished, there was a small flash of light, and Aiden Greengrass materialized a few feet behind them. He'd not only Apparated on the Hogwarts Grounds, something thought impossible, he'd also done it silently. Then, noticing the urn held casually in his hands, Harry realized that it was a Portkey. "Greetings," he said cheerfully. "Glad you could make it. Please grab on to this Portkey." He offered the glowing urn, which appeared to be empty.

Harry, Blaise, and Daphne grasped the urn, and Harry felt the familiar jerk behind his navel as they were ripped off the ground and sent

hurtling through a tunnel of flashing colors and blurred images. Harry braced himself and managed to avoid falling as they hit the ground. His landing was still the least graceful, as he stumbled when his feet touched the snow. Aiden and Blaise barely lost their balance, and Daphne's landing was as calm and collected as her usual demeanor.

"The others are waiting over this ridge," Aiden explained.

"Where are we?" Blaise asked.

"Cornwall," Aiden replied. "A few miles from the border with Devon, near the coast. The location is not especially important. This ceremony, this ritual does not draw upon the historical significance of the surrounding region. While it will take place on land that belongs to a pureblood family, the Rostrons, the fact is that we're holding it here because it's been used for similar ceremonies for hundreds of years. We're not sure who installed most of the stones and created the markings, but it serves our purpose. It's out-of-the-way, far from the prying eyes and *common blood* of outsiders." The way in which Aiden spoke made it clear that he didn't embrace the bigotry and arrogance of many of his peers.

He led the three of them over several ridges until they came to a large depression in the ground, several hundred meters across, and surrounded by snow-covered hills. Around the perimeter of the depression were stone posts, and a large circular piece of gray stone at the center, ringing a pit at its center. Runes and carvings were visible thanks to the raging fire at the center, a blue-green flame that appeared to spring up from the ground itself. Standing loosely around the pillars and the central wheel were five people. Initially, Harry couldn't make out their faces. He was able to identify two of them when Blaise continued toward them after the Greengrasses had stopped. For a moment, all of them stood there, the only sound the howling of the winter wind. However, whether by topography or magic, Harry did not feel the expected biting cold. A comfortable warmth spread through him, but the snow around the wheel did not show any signs of melting.

"I believe some introductions are in order," Aiden said, his voice carrying easily despite the wind. Indeed, it was almost as if the wind

had died down when the man had spoken. Harry noticed that he'd raised the hood of his robes, and his eyes were hidden by shadow. Daphne had done the same. Harry decided not to do the same, as the heads of the Zabinis and the still-unidentified family remained uncovered. "Harry, while you are an acquaintance of Blaise, I do not believe that you have met his parents. Harry Potter, meet Arabella and Stefano Zabini."

The three of them moved closer together. Harry got his first look at Blaise's parents.

Arabella Zabini looked considerably younger than she really was, her black hair braided and her beauty undimmed by age. Her skin was as dark as her son's, and her eyes sparkled with a kind of curiosity and mirth that made him rather uncomfortable. She was a Songstress, Harry knew, possessing a rare and prized voice that could compel others to do just about anything, or simply to bring them to tears with her rich and passionate tones. Arabella, who'd either been born in Africa or born to someone who had been, had a tremendous presence about her. He could understand why Blaise worshipped her. Harry bowed politely, and she returned the gesture. "I am pleased to finally meet you. We have heard much of you from Blaise and others. It is time we had a chance to judge you for ourselves." Her voice was musical, almost intoxicating. As she spoke, Harry could focus on nothing else but the woman in front of him. She commanded the attention of his every sense.

The first thing Harry noticed about Stefano Zabini was that he couldn't have been more different from his wife if he tried. His tanned skin was many shades lighter than his wife and son, and in sharp contrast to the overwhelming and compelling presence of his wife, Harry was only certain that he was there because his grip was firm and strong. The man seemed to shrink every time Harry laid eyes on him, to disappear into the shadows and conceal his very presence. He was quite handsome, with a well-trimmed goatee and bright blue eyes, but his appearance was pristine and nothing more. His face could melt into a crowd of elites as easily as his magical and physical presence. "I am also pleased to meet you," he said in a soft, but strong, voice. Harry released his hand and turned back to Aiden.

“Now then, I’d like to introduce both Blaise Zabini and Harry Potter to Grigory Ivanov, and his heirs, Nikolai and Natasha,” Aiden said.

Harry moved toward the family, and gradually, he began to make out their features. Grigory Ivanov was tall and regal, his gray hair and mustache making it clear that he was the elder of the group. His face was cracked by age lines, but in his eyes was a cold resolve, like hardened steel. He was clearly not a man to cross, or anger. His grip was no less hard, and Harry forced himself to stare into the man’s eyes as their hands clasped, a show of determination and confidence that Harry wasn’t sure he really had. As Blaise did the same, he turned his eyes to the brother and sister.

The first thing that occurred to him were that they were twins, and this was confirmed when Aiden spoke again. “Grigory is an old family friend, one I met through my wife. He has chosen to raise his children in private instead of sending them to a magical school. Natasha and Nikolai are twins, as you might suspect. They are a bit older than you, both eighteen years last month. His family came to Britain during the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.”

“Thank you for the introduction, my friend,” Grigory said, his voice a booming bass, his accent not thick, but discernable. “Harry Potter. It’s quite remarkable for us to meet at last, especially under these circumstances. I am pleased to see that you have not forsaken the Dark as so many might have expected you to. It has been the failing of many, Dumbledore among them. I might have fought for him if he had had me. But I had an obligation to my heirs, and so we remained hidden, known to just a few. It is also a pleasure to meet you, Blaise Zabini. We have had sporadic contact with your family, although this is the first time we’ve met in person.”

Harry studied the twins again. They were about the same height, both shorter than their father. Dark-haired, with light blue eyes shining out into the night. As they stepped forward in unison into the firelight, their hair was revealed to be a dark brown rather than black. They had sharp features and a cold resolve about them that mirrored their father’s. Like Fred and George, they seemed to share a kind of mental connection. Their movements were synchronized, coordinated. Nikolai shared a look with his sister, and a decision was made. He

stepped forward and offered his hand. Harry took it. His grip was like a vise, and his eyes no softer than his father's. Natasha's grip was slightly lighter, yet the cold resolve seemed to run in the family.

"I'm honored to meet a person of your stature, Mr. Ivanov," Harry said. "I am also honored to be present at a ritual of such importance to your family. I appreciate the trust that you have shown in my motives."

"Indeed," Grigory replied. "I've known Aiden for many years, and he told me that despite your family name, you would be respectful and an enthusiastic spectator. That was all that was required to earn my approval. And the Zabini name carries powerful connotations itself, and since we wish to form an alliance, we felt the invitation was appropriate. Now that introductions have been made, I feel it best that we proceed."

"I agree," Aiden said, moving away from his daughter. "Each of you must take your place around the altar, approximately equidistant from the each other, and stand perfectly still while I invoke the rite. We must hurry, as midnight is only a few minutes away. Our window is closing."

Harry waited for those with experience to find places around the stone, moving into a spot between Natasha Ivanova and Arabella Zabini, directly across from Aiden Greengrass. Aiden drew back his hood, and raised his wand to the air, then began chanting.

Harry was no Latin scholar, and the speed at which Aiden spoke made it even more difficult to understand anything of what he was saying. But several words stood out.

Memory.

Family.

Blood.

Honor.

Death.

As Aiden spoke, Harry could feel invisible waves of powerful magic sweep around the gathering, drifting towards a focal point several feet above the fire, which was now a brilliant emerald green and had increased in intensity. He looked to his right and saw Arabella Zabini with her eyes closed, an expression resembling that of perfect ecstasy on her face. To his left, Natasha's arms stretched out from her sides. Her eyes were open, and for a moment, they met his gaze. He looked away, staring over the top of the fire at Aiden, trying to detect the smallest minutia with any of his senses, trying to figure out what was happening.

Then, Aiden fell silent. A brilliant flash lit the altar and the assembled witches and wizards, nearly blinding Harry. More chanting began, this a mixture of many voices. To his stunned amazement, he felt his own mouth moving, his own lips forming words that he did not know, the sound of his voice, blending with all of the others. He did not understand the words; they weren't Latin or anything else he recognized. But it didn't matter. Waves of Dark magic washed over him, heightening his senses, flooding his system with adrenaline. And then, at the very peak, the moment of greatest intensity, when Harry felt that his soul might rip free of his body, everything stopped. No sound but the beating of his heart, no cold, no magic. It was as if he stood in a vacuum, as if the world around him had melted away.

Then it came. The rush of memories that were not his own. Images, songs, moments of fear, passion, bliss, indifference. Blue-white flashes of light arced through the air, swirling about in a hurricane of magic. Then the lights converged on the altar, and the memories fell away. A single figure now stood in the center of the fire. Harry's jaw dropped in stunned disbelief. A man he had never seen in person, yet whose face he knew all too well. The boyish features of a man never able to release his last, precious grip on childhood. Sandy-blond hair worn short, a well-trimmed goatee. Blue eyes that always seemed to be full of mirth and laughter.

Edmond Dressler stood before him within a swirling, bright blue vision. His features were unmarred by the violence that had ended his life. He looked renewed, reborn into perfect form. It was not until Harry noticed his mouth moving that he realized the man was speaking.

...fear not the darkness, Harry, but shun not the light. A balance must be found, a gray area where hopes and dreams will be built, and put to the ultimate test. Your friends will grow in number, and they will serve you because they believe in your ability. Do not be tempted by the promise of power. Pragmatism is a Slytherin's greatest virtue. And when the time comes when all may seem lost, you must let go. Remember that, Harry. When the time comes, when you are losing something you feel that you cannot live without, you must let go. If you do not, what you seek to preserve will itself destroy you...

Edmond's voice faded away into a howling wind, a shrieking crescendo of power being sucked out of the depression, blasting back into the sky. A loud crackle ripped through the air, and the light died as the fire at the center of the altar was extinguished. For a moment, everything was silent. Then Harry forced himself to take a deep breath and exhale it, even as he tried to sear each of Edmond's words into his memory.

He saw that each of the others was also reeling, some appearing weak-legged and stumbling as they tried to maintain their balance. Eyes were wide, breathing was ragged. A few had expressions of disbelief on their faces. Aiden brushed away what might have been a tear. After what seemed like an eternity during which none of them spoke, Grigory Ivanov finally broke the silence. "For those of you that have not experienced this ritual before, I will explain what just happened. On this night, the longest of the year, representing the symbolic conquest of Dark over Light, we call back the spirits and magic of those that have gone before us, to give us wisdom. Each of you saw a different person standing on that altar, heard a different message. These messages are sometimes difficult to decipher, but never disregard the words of the dead. They know more than we will ever understand, until the day that we join them."

Harry nodded in concert with everyone else. Each of the families began moving together. Aiden and his daughter exchanged a few words, while the Zabini family whispered excitedly among themselves. The Ivanov family stood silently, watching the others, although Harry knew that with each glance between brother and sister, some information was exchanged. Harry stood alone in the bitter night, unsure of what to do. He dared not move in the direction of any of the

families, at the risk of offending them. What they had experienced was something intensely, infinitely personal. He had no right to know anything.

Finally, Aiden gestured him over, and with a bit of trepidation, he joined the Greengrass family. "Harry," he said, once he'd come within a few feet, "I have no right to ask, and you have every right to refuse to answer, but my curiosity is overwhelming. Who spoke to you, if anyone?"

With only a slight bit of hesitation, Harry replied. "Daphne's husband, Edmond Dressler."

Aiden's daughter spun to stare at him in confusion, while Aiden's eyes went wide with surprise...and then... "Yes...", he said, understanding dawning on his features. "Of course. I hadn't thought of him."

"May I ask why you are so surprised?"

"This is a *Dark* ritual, Potter," Daphne replied. "The souls that we are calling to us, the spirits that spoke to us, and the magic that enveloped us were *Dark*. *Karachun* is held on this night to recognize the symbolic victory of *Dark* over Light...you see why we are surprised, no?"

"Edmond was a Light wizard," Harry said. "His family was Light, his wife came from a Light family. So why..?"

Aiden took a deep breath. "I can think of only a few explanations," he said. "But they are all quite feasible. That Edmond Dressler appeared to you indicates that of all your deceased family, and, because of your relationship with your guardian, Edmond was family, he alone was not driven away by the call of the Darkness."

"Why him? Why not my parents? Were they afraid?" Harry asked. Somehow, the possibility that his parents had declined an opportunity to appear to him, to communicate with him, was very troubling. It might indicate disapproval of the path he had chosen to walk. He would like to think that if they were still alive, they'd accept the choices he had made, and respect them.

"It's not a matter of fear, or affection," Aiden said. "Edmond came from a Light family, but as a Slytherin, perhaps he was more open to the Dark. And since there was and still is a great deal of Darkness within his wife, a wife that he loved, he loved that piece of the Dark. So when the call came, he was able to answer, because he has already professed his affection for Dark magic. Dark souls."

"And the other possibilities?"

"Considerably less likely," Aiden said. "That your parents were unwilling to face the Dark to see you, to communicate with you. And though James and Lily stood against Voldemort, I know that your mother rarely rejected anyone based on any sort of affiliation. She would have come to you if she had been able."

Whether Aiden knew it or not, his words, spoken in a strangely paternal voice, brought tremendous relief to the Boy-Who-Lived.

"Aiden," Harry said, using his forename only after a bit of hesitation, "is there any kind of...time limit for the advice he gave me? This is an annual rite, correct?"

"Yes," Aiden replied, nodding. "Harry, Dark wizards revere the dead and their magic not merely out of a sense of honoring their memory but more so because we believe that they can see far into the future and far into the past. But they also understand that we, those of us still among the living, cannot cope with such universal knowledge. Our lives are a journey of discovery, and we might go mad if we were to learn what lay at the end of that journey. At the least, we'd have a rather pronounced advantage. So they reveal our futures, and sometimes our pasts, in bits and pieces. But considering the dangers that lie ahead of you, and the destiny that swirls about you, I'd say that you will find meaning in what he told you in the next year or so. Remember what he said, Harry. Grigory was absolutely correct when he urged us all not to disregard the words of the dead. Heed his warnings, take his advice as best you can. Now, we should probably be getting you, Daphne, and Blaise back to Hogwarts. Your absence might be noticed."

A hint of light appeared to the east. Harry checked his watch, and saw that hours had past. Just another mystery in this incredible

experience. Harry tried to cling to every feeling, every sensation and imbed them in his memory.

"Tell your guardian what you wish, Potter," Daphne said, "but be wary of what she might be best off not knowing." Aiden nodded in agreement with his daughter's wisdom.

"The twins want to speak with you," Aiden said. "Quickly, I'll get Blaise." The sun had not yet risen above the horizon, but the clouds had turned to purple and pink.

Harry hurried over to Natasha and Nikolai. "Yes?" he asked.

"We felt your power during the ritual," Natasha said, her voice soft and quiet. "You are indeed more than we had suspected. You should know that if our father agrees, we will form an alliance with you. Because with your power, we also felt your intentions. And we approve."

"You have no idea how grateful I am," Harry said. Finally, he'd made progress.

"We'll see you again sooner than you think," Nikolai added. "Now, return to Hogwarts, and contemplate what you have experienced. I still believe that my first *Karachun* was the most extraordinary experience of my life."

"I will. Thank you," Harry said, then went back to join Aiden, Daphne, and Blaise.

After a few brief farewells, including a few words from Arabella that Harry couldn't understand, they walked back to the Portkey, arriving back at the shore of the lake just as dawn was breaking. Aiden clapped him on the shoulder before he departed, then the three of them silently crept back into the Slytherin dormitory, Harry with his Invisibility Cloak, Zabini with his Illusionist skills, and Daphne with her inborn grace and stealth. Harry collapsed into his bed.

Christmas had at long last arrived. And hours after Ginny and Hermione had bid their goodbyes following a morning spent

exchanging gifts, telling the story of *Karachun*, and spending an hour with his guardian just talking as a mother and son should, Harry prepared for the Yule Ball.

His dress robes were quite handsome, a dark green that complemented his eyes, made from a fabric that was both comfortable and aesthetically pleasing. He'd long since given up trying to comb his hair into anything not resembling a disorderly mess. Bad genes, he knew. Or good genes, depending on the way he thought about it. Even the strongest of hair styling spells probably stood no chance against the Potter hair. A quick look in the mirror confirmed that he looked, well...pretty good. He was just bursting to see Ginny, Hermione had promised with a mischievous grin that he might not recognize her at first.

Harry made his way up the staircase into the Common Room, where Slytherins mingled, clad in mostly expensive, ornate gowns and dress robes. He ignored the glares of Draco Malfoy, who wore a high-collared set of robes that made him resemble a classic vicar, and his date Pansy Parkinson, whose bulk was not quite hidden by her pink, frilly gown. Harry looked around and recognized others. Daphne Greengrass, who had seemed much less cold to him since that night in Cornwall, was as beautiful as he'd expected in a backless, deep blue gown, her hair pulled into an intricate and ornate bun secured with what appeared to be two crossing wands. Her hand rested on the arm of her companion, Theodore Nott.

Blaise Zabini, who grinned at him from across the room, stood triumphantly next to his date, Elisha Moon, who had finally accepted his invitation after letting Blaise sweat for nearly a week. She'd told Harry privately during one of their potions lessons that she liked Blaise, but that she thought he needed to be taken down a notch. In the end, they'd both gotten what they wanted.

But what Harry didn't see among the bustling mob of formally-dressed students was his date. At least, until he finally glanced back and saw her coming up the stairs from the girls' dormitories, accompanied by Anne Grunitch, who wasn't going to the ball and wore semi-formal black robes, and Melissa Quinn, who was, having been surprisingly invited by a Fifth-Year Slytherin named Derek

Sinclair. He seemed like an alright chap, although Harry didn't know him well. Melissa was quite elegant in her red gown, blonde hair twisted into a French braid that trailed down her back.

Between them, wearing a simple, yet pretty gown of a light gold, her fiery hair similarly arranged in a practical but attractive French classic that let much of her Weasley-red hair fall down her back and shoulder, was Ginny Weasley, a nervous grin lighting her face. To Harry, she was the most beautiful thing that he had ever seen. She looked years older, despite her small frame, and her smile as she caught sight of him lifted his spirits immeasurably. She walked toward him, beaming, but didn't say anything. Something felt amazingly *right* about that moment.

"You look...amazing," Harry breathed. Ginny blushed, ducking her head.

"Thanks," she said quietly, "You look pretty good yourself. Got all of those steps memorized, or should I watch my feet?" she asked, referring to the crash course in formal dancing that Daphne had given him.

"I think I'm ready," Harry replied. She smiled. "Do you know what Hermione is doing?"

Her grin got bigger. "Yes, but I'm not allowed to tell you." Despite her attempt at appearing confident, Harry could see that she was as anxious as he was. Neither one of them had any experience with any sort of relationship and both were anxious to make it work.

Harry forced himself to take a deep breath, and just enjoy the moment. "We should probably get going, since we're beginning the Ball," he told her. She nodded, and the two of them linked arms and headed out of the Common Room. Most of the other Slytherin couples were leaving as well, and the few that had extended invitations to students from other houses were already gone.

Harry and Ginny emerged into an Entrance Hall that was packed with well-dressed students, including a sizable representation from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. There appeared to be more inter-school couples than Harry would have expected, including the

absolutely stunning Fleur Delacour, arm-in-arm with Roger Davies, the Ravenclaw Quidditch Captain. Fleur was getting death glares from both sexes, from multiple schools. If looks could kill, she'd be dead about twenty times over.

Harry focused on Ginny, reassuring her that she was his first and only choice, and one that he definitely didn't regret. They managed to make their way over to the doors of the Great Hall, which were now being opened. McGonagall smiled at the two of them and scanned the crowd for the last two champions. Harry joined her visual search. He spotted Cedric hurriedly pushing through the crowd with Cho Chang on his arm. She was quite attractive, although Harry had never been as enthralled with her personality as he had been by her looks. Then, he saw Krum...

And Hermione.

"You weren't kidding," Harry whispered to Ginny. Somehow, his best friend had managed to straighten her hair and arrange it in a single braid that wrapped down around her neck. The result was quite stunning. She beamed widely at him as she saw them standing there, and got to their side a few moments later. "You two look fantastic," she gushed.

Harry still wasn't quite able to get his mouth working. As Ginny had predicted, he could barely recognize the bushy-haired bookworm he knew so well.

"Wow, that turned out even better than I expected," Ginny said, giving her friend a warm hug. "You look beautiful, Hermione."

"Yeah, you do," Harry got out at last. Her fine periwinkle-blue dress completed the look, and Harry realized that those bulky school robes certainly hid more than he'd first suspected. "Hullo Viktor," he said cheerfully.

"Hello Harry," the Bulgarian Seeker replied. He seemed a bit distant, distracted. Most likely, he decided, by the girl standing next to him. It was relieving, in a way, to know that even a Quidditch phenom such as Krum still got nervous in the presence of a very attractive girl. Harry realized that Krum was probably used to girls fawning over him,

whereas Hermione didn't show signs of outward affection. She looked pretty pleased to be his date, however.

Students began moving into the Great Hall, which had been transformed into an ornate ballroom, softly lit with blue light that seemed to come from the night sky above rather than the blue candles scattered about. Tables had been set off to the side, and the students were being directed to stand on either side of the center aisle. McGonagall gestured for the champions and their dates to stay back. In the meantime, Harry watched the student entering, spotting some rather unusual couples. Topping the list had to be Neville Longbottom in a set of robes best fitting a man three times his age, and Luna Lovegood, whose hair and ears were decorated with ornaments that might have been hand-made out of rubbish from a classroom waste basket, including tin-foil earrings. She stared straight ahead, in contrast to the nervous Gryffindor who looked around as if searching for an exit. Ginny giggled a bit when they passed. Luna gave him an odd, demented smile when they reached the line of students.

Hagrid and Madame Maxime made up the largest couple present. Flitwick and Sinistra, the Astronomy Professor, made up the smallest. The Weasley brothers passed through without a major confrontation, although Harry knew that might change after they got off the dance floor. Fred and George had each asked out one of the Gryffindor chasers, and Ron, looking rather glum in a mothballed set of robes that might have belonged to a great-grandfather, had somehow managed to get Parvati Patil, who didn't look altogether thrilled with the arrangement.

Finally, the other students had taken their places, and it was time. Dumbledore welcomed them to the Ball, told them to enjoy themselves, and then gave way to the Champions. Classical music filled the air, along with some applause, and the ball began.

To Harry, dancing was not at all like Quidditch. Yes, there was a degree of grace and instinct involved. But since he lacked the latter, he'd essentially memorized his steps and executed them like a machine, one movement at a time. He tried to relax, but nearly tripped over Ginny in the process, and went back to focusing on

precision. They kept it simple, opting not to try to impress the crowd. After the first two dances, other couples began to join them on the floor, including a rather agile waltz by Dumbledore and McGonagall that got many other couples excited enough to try. Harry had heard that the start of the Ball would be more formal, followed by the popular Weird Sisters, who would play music more suited to the age of most of the participants. Harry wasn't really a huge music enthusiast.

Ginny, for the most part, seemed to be enjoying herself. She moved with a grace and fluidity that he simply lacked. She quickly adjusted to his mistakes, and led him when he became somewhat hesitant. Harry supposed that to the casual observer, their dancing was perfectly average, nothing more or less.

Eventually, Harry started enjoying himself. He was getting the feel of dancing, and his initial anxiety had faded. He smiled brightly at Ginny, who smiled back. "Are you having fun?" she asked.

"Now I am," he replied. Harry glanced over at the other couples. Hermione was laughing and Krum had actually held a smile. Everyone else he could see seemed to be enjoying themselves. Harry finally decided he'd had enough, and with Ginny's consent, they moved off of the dance floor and found a table, where they were joined by Krum and Hermione.

"I didn't know you could dance, Harry," Hermione said teasingly. "Honestly, that looked quite good. Did you enjoy it?"

"Mostly," he said. "Do you know how we're supposed to actually get food?"

Hermione shrugged. Ginny pointed to the table where Dumbledore and most of the other teachers were sitting. It was impossible to make out what he was saying, but every time his lips moved, a plate of food appeared in front of him. Harry decided it was worth a shot. "Chicken?" he asked the seemingly inanimate table. In front of him, the requested food appeared. His request for pumpkin juice met with equal success. The rest of them ordered food and began eating.

"Harry, if you don't mind, I'd like for both of us to get back out there again," Ginny commented. Harry agreed.

He turned to Krum, who was smiling as Hermione laughed at something he had said. He appeared to be a lot more relaxed and confident than he'd been earlier. "Had any luck with the egg, mate?"

Krum shrugged. "I probably wouldn't tell you if I had discovered anything important, no offense."

"None taken," Harry assured him. Even though the two of them had an amiable relationship, they were still both competitors.

"But I haven't discovered anything extremely helpful. I have merely managed to make a lot of noise on the ship. I think I might have some ideas, but I haven't had a chance to explore them. Have you figured out what it is?"

Harry shook his head, swallowing some bread before replying. "I'm stymied by the bloody thing."

"I am certain that both of us will figure it out," Krum replied confidently. "I look forward to the rest of the competition. May the best wizard win." He raised his glass, and Harry did the same.

"I'm with you there. We should probably just enjoy the company tonight," he said, smiling at Ginny. Krum gave Hermione a similarly affectionate look.

"I love how they talk about us as if we aren't here. Quite arrogant, honestly," Hermione said.

"Typically male." Ginny giggled, and Harry flashed a quick glare.

"I didn't mean it that way," he said in defense.

"I'm just teasing you," she assured him. "You are many things, Harry, but chauvinistic is not one of them."

"Having fun?"

Harry groaned. Without turning, he asked, "Can't find your date, Weasley?"

"I had better things to do."

"I still can't believe that you got Parvati to go with you in the first place. What did you do, knock her out and force-feed her a Love Potion?" This time, he did turn around. He felt Ginny's hand on his arm.

"*Honestly*," Hermione hissed. "What is your problem, Ron? And why are you provoking him, Harry?"

"Because he annoys me," Harry replied in a low voice.

"Because he's involved with my sister, and he didn't bother to tell anyone," Ron replied.

Harry moved to stand up, but Ginny beat him to it. He decided to let the siblings fight it out. "Despite your own beliefs, you don't *own* me, Ronald," Ginny said. "I don't need to tell you or the twins or anyone else what I'm doing and who I'm doing it with. I'm not your baby sister anymore; I can take care of myself."

"I'm just looking out for you," he responded weakly.

"How? By harassing my friends because you don't like them? I don't care if you approve of my actions or choices. They are mine, and mine alone. Harry didn't force me to go with him."

"He asked you. It's not like you were going to refuse or anything. Besides, you've been crazy about him since you were in diapers!"

SLAP. Harry had winced a second before Ginny had even raised her hand. Ron backpedaled, while Ginny's face was bright red, anger searing in her eyes. "*Back off*. That's the last time I'm going to tell you. I'm a *Slytherin*. My date is a *Slytherin*. Some of my friends are *Slytherins*. I think a whole lot of Gryffindors, including *you*, are self-righteous arses. Get over it."

"Ginny..."

“Go away,” Ginny growled. “And tell that to Fred and George, too. I love you, Ron, but I can’t stand you sometimes. This is one of those times. Leave before I hex you.”

Ron retreated under the verbal onslaught.

Ginny sat down, radiating fury and frustration. Harry laid a hand on her shoulder, and squeezed gently. “I can’t *believe* him...”

“Relax,” he told her. “It wasn’t nearly as bad as I thought it was going to be, anyway. Fred and George weren’t even involved.”

“They aren’t huge fans of you either,” she admitted. “But they do a much better job of hiding it. Ron wouldn’t know tact if it ate him, much less bit him on the arse. Merlin knows how they’ll react if they see us snogging.”

Harry’s mind froze for a moment. A quick glance at Hermione and Krum showed that they were engaged in their own quiet conversation. Hermione seemed to be in the process of explaining something, and Krum was at least playing the part of attentive listener. “Don’t you think you’re getting a little ahead of yourself there?”

Ginny shrugged. “Granted, I’m not sure I’m entirely ready to turn this into a full-blown relationship, but you’ve had fun, right?”

“Yeah,” he said, a little less enthusiastically than he’d intended. He was rather conflicted about the whole thing. He liked Ginny, *really* liked her. She liked him. The problem was that he already had so much to think about, to plan, to consider. Adding a relationship with one of his best friends didn’t sound like a fantastic idea. Although he’d come to understand that when it came to these sorts of things, sticking to a plan was difficult at best. “Yeah, I have. I mean, the Ball’s not even finished yet, but I’m willing to give it a go if you are.”

She nodded. “Look, Harry, I understand that you have a lot to think about, that you have a lot of stress on you right now, what with the Tournament...and the war, and everything else. But I really want this. And I can sense that you want it too. And forgive me for saying but...I don’t think you should let your obligations prevent you from doing this.” Ginny turned and took Harry’s hands in her own.

"I know," Harry replied. "Look, I don't know what to expect, and neither do you."

"That's the way first relationships tend to go," Ginny said dryly. Harry realized how silly he sounded.

"Of course you're right," he said. "I just..."

Ginny put a finger on his lips, cutting him off. "Stop thinking," she ordered. Then she smiled and laughed. Harry did as well. "Do you want to dance?" The Weird Sisters were playing something relatively slow, and he'd eaten his fill.

She smiled again. "I didn't think you were actually going to ask. Of course I do."

For the rest of the evening, Harry was about as relaxed as he'd been in ages. He took Ginny's advice, and managed to push all of his other thoughts, fears, and concerns into the back of his mind. He focused on the present. On Ginny. On his feet. Occasionally he took a look around, and they took a break to catch their breath, but for the most part he allowed himself to just live in the moment.

There were a few things he did notice. For one, Barty Crouch wasn't in attendance, instead he was represented by Percy Weasley. If his guardian had made an appearance, he hadn't seen her. She'd never promised to come to the Ball, but he'd hoped she'd at least find time to stay for a few minutes. Most of the other students seemed to be enjoying themselves (a notable exception being Ron, who was sulking at a table with Seamus Finnegan, Lavender Brown, and Dean Thomas.) Many of the students were mingling freely with the young men and women from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. A large percentage of the young males in the room were still dumbstruck by Fleur, who eventually disappeared outside with Davies. On the dance floor, they had a brief encounter with Cedric and Cho, who were pleasant enough. Harry decided he wanted to get to know the Hufflepuff boy better. He was one of the more honest and bright people he'd met.

Eventually, Harry and Ginny slipped out of the Great Hall and went outside. It was a clear night, the air crisp but surprisingly tolerable.

Much of the snow from the recent cold snap had melted in the last few days, and a number of students were mingling around some of the bushes...as well as engaging in other activities. Flitwick's Warming Charm Lesson had come just in time for the 4th Years. Ginny told him about some of her experiences with her brothers when she was young, and Harry listened intently, eager to learn more about them. Besides Ron, who had once apparently been a decent human being, they all seemed pretty friendly and interesting. It was evident that her family was still extremely important to her. They also talked more about the gifts they'd received that morning, with Ginny bursting out in laughter as Harry described Dobby's presentation of his gift, a pair of mis-matched socks. Harry had recently checked in on the elf, who was doing well at Hogwarts. It seemed entirely possible that Daphne might just allow him to stay there. He seemed happy, although he was clearly frustrated by his inability to please Crouch's old elf Winky, who'd also obtained employment from Dumbledore. She was still moping about being dismissed. Hermione hadn't been pleased, and might have ended up making the situation worse. At least she'd abandoned her plan to publicize her criticism of the way house-elves were treated.

Love and hope might have been in the air, but Severus Snape was having none of it. He nearly ran them over as he swooped around the area, blasting rosebushes and docking points from snogging couples, sending them fleeing into the night. Ginny speculated that all of the Yuletide joy just made Snape even more cranky. Harry had to agree.

They found a bench along the path and sat down, continuing their conversation. Harry kept his mind from drifting mainly by focusing on her. A few minutes later, they were joined by Luna and Neville, or rather, Luna dragging Neville by the sleeve of his robes onto a bench opposite them.

"Luna, are you sure you want to stay out here? Aren't you cold?"

"Perhaps I want to be cold," she replied.

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Hello Ginevra. Hello Harry Potter," she said. "Nice night, isn't it? I hope you didn't eat any of the food. It was infested."

"Hullo Neville," Harry said. The shy Gryffindor looked surprised that Harry was talking to him. "Have you and Luna been having a good time?"

"I suppose," he said. "I mean, dancing's not really my thing. I've sort of...well, I haven't done Luna's toes much good."

"I told you, Neville, that I don't mind. Actually, I like it. My feet don't itch anymore," Luna said. "And I think you are a perfectly good dancer."

"There's no use lying to make me feel better," Neville protested. "I'm awful. Grandmum says so, and she's right."

"Do you think that your grandmother is always right?" Luna asked. "She's old, after all. Her brain is rusty and full of holes."

"You don't know my grandmother," he assured her.

Luna stared blankly at him. "Or maybe I simply know her better than you do. Familiarity isn't always the same thing as understanding."

It was easily the most logical and lucid thing Luna had ever said in Harry's presence. And, knowing her, it was likely to remain that way. Poor Neville. Harry had learned to filter Luna's words, but Neville, as always eager to please, was probably listening intently to every word, and depressed by his inability to understand her. Luna had the potential to be either the best thing that happened to Neville, or the worst thing. It was about even odds.

"I wonder how the Centaurs are feeling right now."

Even for Luna, that was random.

"Why?" Ginny asked.

"Well, I care about everyone," she said. "And since they always look at the stars, their necks must be very tired right now. Since you can see almost all of the stars, they've been craning them for hours. Water is the answer, Harry Potter."

Harry blinked, unsure of what he'd heard. "What?"

"You heard me. I don't need to say it again."

"The answer to what?" Ginny asked.

"You know," she said. "Professor Snape isn't in a very good mood tonight, is he? I've always wanted to have a chance to look in his ear. He'd be much happier without the Luluworm that lives in there. It makes him dislike other people that are happier than him. That's the worst thing someone can do, you know? It's terrible to spread misery. There's already too much misery in the world. How can anything get done when people spend all of their time feeling sorry for themselves, focusing on what they can't do instead of what they can do. It's all quite rational, when you think about it. Of course, too much happiness is a bad thing, too."

"Now you've lost me," Harry said.

"We need misery to put happiness in perspective. How can we appreciate the times that we are happy if they are no different than any other moment in our lives."

"Do you always talk like this?" Neville asked, sounding intimidated.

"Only with Harry. He understands."

"Understands what?"

"The price."

If there was ever a good conversation killer, that was it. Especially on this night. "How's school going for you this year, Neville?" Harry asked, trying to direct the conversation back into the mundane from the philosophical.

"Pretty well, I think," he said cheerfully. "Gran's pleased."

"Why is it when you talk about something you do well or something you do poorly, you mention your grandmother?" Luna asked. "It's as if it doesn't matter what *you* think, it's only about what the crazy old

lady with the bird on her head thinks. Does that bird ever fly around the house? It's quite colorful. Does it have a name?"

"Don't say that about her," Neville said, sounding angry. "She took care of me, raised me. She's all that I have."

"And you wonder why you fail?" Luna said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Whatever you want it to mean."

Neville and Luna continued to argue. Ginny nudged him with her elbow, and whispered. "They fight like an old married couple, and they barely know each other. Do you actually understand her?"

"The key is that I don't always *try* to understand her. She says things that don't have meaning, to me or sometimes even to her."

"Then why does she say them?" Ginny asked. "Why bother talking about Luluworms if she doesn't believe they exist?"

"I honestly don't know...you're shivering."

"Yeah," Ginny said. "It's getting late anyway. Want to go find Hermione and Krum?"

Harry agreed and they headed back inside. When they got back into the Great Hall, the crowd of students had thinned considerably. The majority had gone elsewhere. They watched Fred and George steal the floor as they danced energetically with their dates, the Gryffindor Chasers scrambling to keep up with them. Dumbledore was applauding their efforts.

They found Krum also watching the action, standing alone near the punch bowls. "Where's Hermione?" Harry asked.

Krum looked depressed. Clearly, something had happened. "She left," he explained. "She said she was tired."

"Did something happen?" Ginny asked. Krum sighed.

"I think that I made her unhappy. I don't think that we have all that much in common."

"I'm sure you did your best," Ginny reassured him. "So she went back to the Common Room?"

"I think so," he said. "I asked to walk her back, but she declined." He looked glum. "Perhaps I was foolish."

"I'll talk to her," Ginny promised. He smiled weakly. Harry wondered what might have happened. He'd gotten the sense that the attraction was far more heavily weighted towards Krum than it was Hermione. Hermione liked him, thought he was handsome, as far as he knew, but Krum seemed to really have a thing for the Gryffindor bookworm. Hopefully it would work out.

Arm-in-arm, they headed back down the dungeons. They were deserted. Harry guessed that most of the students had gone outside, probably to escape the watching eyes of the teachers. Some had probably gone to bed as well, seeing as it was just past midnight. They paused outside the entrance to the Slytherin Common Room.

"I had a lot of fun tonight," she told him.

"So did I," he replied, smiling at her.

For a moment, neither of them moved. Then, without much conscious thought, Harry bent down and kissed her gently on the lips. He held it for a moment, and then looked anxiously for her reaction. She looked surprised, but very pleased.

"We can make this work," she said. "I know we can." She opened her arms, and they embraced. He kissed her forehead, less hesitant this time, and she leaned against him.

"Potter. Weasley." Snape's sharp tone destroyed whatever mood had been created in an instant as they jerked apart. Harry became very irritated. The bastard probably *knew* how tender a moment he'd interrupted.

"Professor?" Harry replied, trying to keep his tone as civil as possible.

“Pardon me for interrupting you, but I have news. Your friend Granger has been attacked. She’s been taken to the Hospital Wing.” He seemed uninterested in the whole thing, but Harry supposed that was better than him relishing it, if anything.

“Who?” Ginny demanded. “Who attack her?”

“How exactly would I know *that*, Miss Weasley?” Snape shot back. She glared at him.

Harry already knew the answer. There was only one bastard who had the motivation and the cowardice to do this, on this night.

And he was going to make Draco Malfoy pay. Soon the whole school would know not to cross Harry Potter...or his friends.

A/N: That was a fun chapter to write. Lots of pivotal events in that one. I only hope my writing did them justice.

If you've been waiting a while to see Malfoy squashed like a bug, than you'll get your wish soon. Harry needs to finish off this distraction, prove himself to his fellow Slytherins, and avenge the attack on Hermione. Don't be surprised if this changes Hermione's outlook a bit as well. The next chapter will feature a long conversation between Harry and Hermione, which will sort out a few things.

I love the character of Aiden Greengrass. I love what he represents for Harry, and I love the possibilities for the future. His daughter has also gone from a curiosity to a character of major importance as well. Blaise is also beginning to emerge as a more mature character. I suppose I can just say he was going through his own growing pains, trying to understand his own indendity. In other words, I screwed up.

If you are a bit confused by the weather, well, I'm sorry. I'm pretty sure that winters in Scotland are pretty miserable, but it was clearly warm enough in GoF that a bunch of students were outside, frolicking, eavesdropping, and snogging. So if it was really cold, that wouldn't be happening. Hence, I inserted a random warmish front.

Without a question, the most interesting part of this chapter to write was the Karachun ritual. It played upon a lot of the general associations I've established with Light and Dark Magic. Dark is associated with death, not merely in causing it, but in revering and attempting to recall the souls of the dead. The Light shun this practice. The Ivanovs, whose names took me about an hour to actually decide, are just the first of a series of non-Hogwarts families that will make appearances in the series. Introducing and describing Zabini's parents was fun as well.

The funniest part of this chapter was the conversation between poor Neville and Luna. As usual, Luna interspersed complete nonsense with far-reaching wisdom. I'm really trying to get Neville a bigger role, but until the DA (or whatever I decide to call it) is formed, Harry's interhouse interaction is seriously limited.

I really hope that the Ball was believable. I think it came out pretty good, but I was sort of uncertain at a number of parts. I decided to get the first kiss over with, figuring that it was appropriate. If you are still having trouble seeing Ginny as a partner for Harry, consider this: she understands him better than anyone else, including, at times, him. She's far less worrisome than Hermione, and she's becoming a stronger character as the series wears on. And, damn it, relationships are often based on pure physical attraction. There isn't any explanation required for that.

I didn't mean to make Krum into comic relief, although I suppose he's served that purpose quite well. He's a very strong and capable wizard, even if he hasn't shown it.

Of all the champions, Fleur is the most alien to Harry. Hence, they aren't really going to have much meaningful interaction, at least, not yet. Things might happen to chance that.

One more thing: all told, three characters will die by the end of Darkness Rising. Of course I won't tell you which ones.

Overall, although this is an AU, I'm not going to dramatically break with canon until the 6th part, for obvious reasons. Without Horacruxes, I'd have little to write about. Obviously I haven't read the 7th book, but I'm pretty sure that, if I can actually keep writing long enough to get to

it (and if each part of the rest of the series ends up as long as this thing will, that's no sure thing), they won't have all that much in common.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter 16: Promises

Harry had steeled himself against the worst as he and Ginny rushed to the Hospital Wing, but he was still sickened and enraged when Madam Pomfrey pulled back the privacy curtain, revealing a battered and unconscious Hermione Granger.

The visible bruising was heaviest around her face, including red swelling around both eyes, but the injuries continued beneath her hospital gown. A few serious cuts and abrasions testified to the brutality of the attack. Her skin was pale and lifeless, and she looked, well, dead, except for the shallow breathing that lifted her chest up and down every few seconds. "She had some broken bones," Madam Pomfrey was saying. "A few ribs and her right arm, but I healed those up. The rest...well, there's a limit to what healing magic can do. I can't *imagine* a person doing this to someone on Christmas night."

Harry gritted his teeth; already a plan for revenge was forming in his mind. He'd have to do some research to make sure he could entrap Malfoy, and force him to fight on Harry's terms. He wouldn't allow Malfoy to intimidate him by striking through his friends. He'd have to solidify his knowledge of pureblood customs and rules. Revenge would come later.

"How long is she going to be bedridden?" asked Ginny quietly.

Madam Pomfrey shrugged. "A few days at the least. Perhaps a week. I hope that the person who did this is caught and properly punished. I'm sure Albus will make it his first priority."

Either she was being honest or she was trying to dissuade them from seeking revenge on their own. It wasn't worth the effort. Lucius Malfoy would protect his son and his bodyguards, who had likely inflicted most of the damage. Harry would take away that protection and force Malfoy into a one-on-one duel. From what he understood, this was more than enough to be considered a major offense. And seeing as Harry didn't have any blood family left, he was pretty sure he had discretion as to whom he considered his family.

"I must admit that I've never dealt with anyone so badly beaten at Hogwarts. Most of the time I'm healing magically-inflicted injuries.

This sort of physical attack is rare.” With that, she wandered off. As soon as she was out of earshot, Harry voiced what he’d been unhappily considering.

“This is my fault,” he said quietly.

Ginny, her arms wrapped around her gown, shook her head and glared at him. “Don’t even start...you don’t know...”

“Yes, I do. Malfoy. Or, more accurately, Crabbe and Goyle. And he did it the way he did because I slugged him in the face when he was harassing Hermione outside Hogsmeade. He made a comment about fighting like a Muggle. So he strikes back in the same way, only with greater intensity.”

“I agree with you that it was Malfoy. What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to give him what he wants. I’m going to fight him with magic. I’m going to challenge him to a duel, and once I’ve beaten and humiliated him, he’ll be neutralized, and I’ll not only have revenge for Hermione, but I’ll remove him as a threat and gain influence within Slytherin.”

Ginny looked uncomfortable, but she nodded. She understood what had to be done. “Just to play devil’s advocate, don’t you think you ought to give Dumbledore and McGonagall a chance to punish Draco?”

“They won’t tie it to him. They don’t understand the circumstances surrounding this attack. The only one that does is Snape and...well, he’s...”

“What?”

“He’s Draco’s *godfather*. Lucius is one of his closest friends, or at least someone who passes for a close friend in Snape’s life. He wouldn’t betray Draco’s father, or Lucius’s son,” Harry explained. “He won’t go to Dumbledore. It’s a matter of honor. Snape probably feels that’s all he has left.”

Ginny grimaced. "So you really feel you have to do this yourself? I don't want you to get hurt, Harry. And neither does she," the redhead added, gesturing at their unconscious friend.

"I know," Harry said. "But I can't give Malfoy the impression that I'm afraid to take risks to defend myself and my friends. No, I've got to end this before it goes any further. Draco's a coward without any leverage or allies of his own. If he falls, he loses everything."

"The same can be said of you," Ginny argued. "If you lose to Malfoy, and it sounds like he's very well trained at dueling, then you lose any chance of gaining support within your own house. You'll be humiliated and forced to recoup and prove yourself. And Malfoy will get more ambitious, more egotistical. He'll probably be his own undoing."

Harry shook his head. "It doesn't matter. If I don't prove anything, then I gain nothing when he inevitably falls. I *have* to do this Ginny."

"Not for me. And not for her," Ginny said. "If you want to do it for yourself, then I can accept that. But I won't let you put yourself in danger to defend my honor, as it were. And Hermione feels the same way. I don't even need to ask her."

"Ask...me...what?" a tired, weak voice came from behind them.

"Hermione?" Ginny asked, rushing over to her bedside; Harry right behind. "Are you alright? How are you feeling?"

"I...hurt," she replied. The Muggleborn witch seemed to be struggling to find enough energy to speak. "Everywhere. What...what happened?"

"You don't remember?" Ginny asked, the shock apparent in her voice. "Do you remember the Ball? Krum?"

Hermione nodded as best she could. "Yeah...argument...silly...what happened...to me?"

"You were ambushed and beaten," Harry replied. "Presumably on the way back to your dormitory. I'm sorry, Hermione. I really am."

“Stop apologizing for something that isn’t your fault,” Ginny snapped at him.

“But...”

“She’s awake?” Madam Pomfrey asked, bustling over, carrying a tray of potions, and practically knocking them aside. She checked Hermione’s forehead. “A bit of a fever coming on dear, nothing to worry about. Good to see you awake. A little rest and you’ll be good as new.” She poured a potion into a goblet, helped prop up her patient, and handed her the cup, the contents of which Hermione obediently swallowed. She turned to face the two Slytherins. “I think you two had best be getting to bed. It’s rather late and your friend needs rest. You can come back in the morning.” Her tone was softer, and more compassionate than usual.

Before Harry could object, Ginny nodded and grabbed his arm. “We’ll see you tomorrow,” she told her best friend. “Hang in there. Come on,” she said to Harry. He decided not to resist, and they left their friend in the tender and expert care of the MediWitch.

The walk back to the Slytherin dorms was silent, as both of them were lost in their thoughts. Their parting was equally understated, merely an exchange of looks before both of them descended the stairs into their respective dormitories.

Harry awoke hours before sunrise, sitting bolt upright in the darkness. Something was calling him. Normally he might be suspicious, or even frightened, yet something about the mental summons was comfortingly familiar, and he silently slipped out of bed and up the stairs into the Slytherin Common Room, now lit only by the dying embers of the fire. A lone figure sat on one of the couches. He moved to sit in one of the chairs near the occupied couch. “Why are you here?” he asked in a whisper.

“I wanted to see you,” his guardian replied, her voice louder than his. Clearly, she was not concerned about being heard. “I’m going to be leaving soon, and given everything that’s happened recently, I thought it best that we talk.”

"You didn't come to the Ball," Harry said.

She nodded. Her face was hidden by shadow, although her gray-green eyes were visible from where he was sitting. "I'm sorry. I know you expected me to put in an appearance, but I felt...uncomfortable. Did you and Ginny have a good time?"

"Yes," Harry replied, puzzled by her response. "Yes, we uh...had a blast. I think, well...I think we have something. And we agreed to see where it leads us."

"You kissed her." It was not a question.

"Yes," he replied, a bit hesitant.

Daphne smiled, chuckling a little. "Ah, young love...I'm happy for you, Harry. And happy for her. She's a wonderful young woman."

"I know," he said. "Why are you leaving?" he asked, remembering the reason for this conversation.

"Dumbledore asked me for a favor, and I granted it to him. He wants me to be...a scout. There are certain locations that he wants me to find and investigate. We don't know how prepared Voldemort is. We need to know, Harry. We need to know what we're up against."

"I understand," Harry said. "But why you?"

"Because he trusts me," she said. "And because I have infiltration training from my time with the Aurors that the others don't. With a few Glamour Charms, I can disappear into a crowd with the best of them. We need any intelligence that we can get. Rumors, reports of odd happenings, even gossip. Any of that can tell us things about Voldemort's forces that we don't know. I'll probably be gone for a few weeks. I leave tomorrow morning. But before I leave, I needed to talk to you about a number of things."

"You heard about Hermione?"

She nodded. "And you are convinced that it's Draco Malfoy and his friends?"

"It has to be," he said. "No one else has the motive...or the cowardice...to pull something like this. They left early from the Ball."

"It couldn't be a bunch of Durmstrang students entertaining themselves by beating up a Muggleborn?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't think so. That it was a physical, rather than magical attack, makes sense if it was Malfoy. I slugged him outside the Shrieking Shack the last time that he was harassing Hermione. This is his idea of revenge."

Daphne considered that, then nodded. "Alright. I believe you. What are you planning?"

"If I can, I'm going to challenge him to a duel. I've read about pureblood customs that mentioned a wizard having the right to an unregulated duel if a serious offense is committed against a member of that wizard's family. Hermione isn't a blood relative, but since I don't have any living family members, I believe that I can choose who I consider family. Namely you, Ginny, and Hermione. I'm going to research that, of course."

"I might have some suggestions of where to start. Actually, I'll stop by Dressler Manor and send a few books with Yancy. You should be able to find what you're looking for. I only ask one thing. Delay the duel until I get back. I can defend your right to it from any interference, if indeed you have that right."

"So you aren't bothered by the idea?"

"Not at all. Assuming you are merely fighting until one of you is disarmed, then I look at it as an opportunity. Don't underestimate him. I have no doubt that Draco has had dozens of private tutors throughout his life. He might be a coward, but a cornered coward can be dangerous."

Harry nodded. "Anything else?"

Daphne looked into his eyes. "You were rather vague when I asked you about the ritual. I'll understand if you don't want to talk about it, but if you are willing to tell me anything more, I'd love to hear it. I've

done some background work on Ivanov and his children. They'd be powerful and influential allies. But the other thing I wanted to ask you about was how you intended to court the Light purebloods? You mustn't make the mistake of forgetting them. And I wouldn't assume they will come to your side simply because they are opposed to Voldemort."

"I know," Harry said. "I'm working on that. It's just difficult because I don't have any connections through any of the students here. Aiden's interest in me was a godsend. He's become a conduit through which I can contact some Dark pureblood families. I don't have one on the other side."

"I'll see what I can do," Daphne said. "In the meantime, don't forget about the Golden Egg. That needs to be near the top of your priority list."

"I know. I've had a few ideas...I just haven't had the time to test them."

"Find it," she advised. "I should go," she said. "We'll talk more when I return. One more thing. Have you had any dreams lately? Has your scar burned?"

Harry shook his head. "Either Voldemort's given up, or my Occlumency is enough to block him out within the wards of Hogwarts."

Daphne stood. "Alright. Good luck. I'll see you soon." She opened her arms, and Harry stepped into them. They held each other tightly, then broke apart. She slipped into the darkness, and Harry stood there for just a moment before returning to his bed.

Harry and Ginny returned to Hermione's bedside the next morning after a quick breakfast. Their friend was still groggy, and seemed unable to remember anything after the argument she'd had with Krum. She still hadn't elaborated or even hinted at the nature of the argument. Harry decided that he'd let her decide if and when she wanted to reveal that information. Overall, she was doing better, although she wouldn't be leaving the Hospital Wing anytime soon.

Besides her collection of cuts and bruises, her newly healed bones were still somewhat fragile. Even at its best, magic couldn't match nature itself. Hermione seemed more confused than terrified. Finally, Harry had told his suspicions, including his plan to draw Malfoy into a duel. Her response had been rather predictable, and her objections only ceased after he'd made it absolutely clear to her that she had nothing to do with the decision, that revenge was not his primary motivation. Strictly speaking, both could not be true; Harry knew that since his justification for the duel was to avenge the offense to his "family," Hermione's injuries had *everything* to do with his motivation. Harry wasn't completely sure in reality how much of it was to protect his friends and how much of it was to neutralize Malfoy once and for all. But in her somewhat muddled state, Hermione wasn't able to pick up on the details.

Harry had considered telling her about Luna's advice for solving the Egg, but decided against it. Hermione was still recovering and had more than enough to think about. Once she was back on her feet, he'd seek her counsel.

His mind remained unsettled. A part of him wanted to march right up to Malfoy and challenge him then and there, but the rational part of him knew that he needed to wait and be certain that Malfoy could be legally pulled into a duel on Harry's terms. Old pureblood laws were vague and often contradictory. Hopefully, the material that Daphne had promised to send would provide answers to some of his questions. That was only one of the things on his mind. The Golden Egg, his relationship with Ginny, the ramifications of Aiden's efforts on his behalf, the advice given by the ghostly specter of Edmond Dressler, the rising Darkness, his lack of allies in the Light, Luna's warnings and hints...it threatened to overwhelm him. He needed focus, and he needed a chance to clear his mind. The brief respite from the Scottish Winter had lasted just two days, and a blanket of heavy snow had greeted the students that morning, threatening to delay the departure of the Hogwarts Express. Flying wasn't really an option.

Ginny, it seemed, sensed his unease as they walked back from the Hospital Wing. The corridors were mostly empty, as most of his fellow schoolmates were preparing to head home for the last week of

Christmas Break. Ginny had already gotten her things together. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah...fine...why do you ask?"

"You aren't *fine*," Ginny replied. "You have that look you get when you feel like the world is on your shoulders."

"I have a specific look for that feeling?" he asked.

She nodded. "Are you sure you're alright with me going home? I could stay and keep you company if you'd like."

Harry shook his head, amazed by her charity. "Don't be daft," he said. "I'd never ask you to do that. I'll be okay. You should spend time with your family."

"Okay," she replied. "Can you at least tell me what's bothering you?"

"If I did, I'd think about it more, and I'm trying to avoid that."

"That's probably a good approach, knowing you," Ginny said. She smiled. "Have it your way then. Take care of Hermione for me, and just try to relax. How about paying a visit to Hagrid? You haven't seen much of him lately."

"That's a brilliant idea," Harry replied. "I'll do exactly that."

She shrugged. "Alright...well, I guess I'll see you in a week then?"

"Count on it," Harry said, grinning. He moved closer to her, and she wrapped her arms around him, pressing her lips against his in a surprisingly aggressive move. The kiss was brief, but sent a tingle of electricity down his spine. Her hugged her tightly, and she returned it. Finally, they broke apart. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too."

There was a long pause, during which they simply stared at each other.

"Well, see you in a week," she said, seeming reluctant to leave.

“Yeah, I’ll see you then,” Harry said. “Take care.”

“You too.”

With that, she slowly slipped away, heading back down toward the dungeons. Harry decided that he’d bear the cold and pay a visit to the Hogwarts Groundskeeper.

Harry hammered a frozen fist on the door of Hagrid’s hut, waiting for what seemed like an eternity before the half-giant finally opened it, blasting warm air in Harry’s face. He quickly scampered inside, and was greeted by Fang, who looked quite pleased to see him. His master wasn’t any less enthusiastic. “Arry! Was wondering when yeh were gonna come ‘round. Sit, sit. Right there, near the fire. Yeh must be freezin’. Here, let me get yeh a cup o’ tea.”

“Thanks,” Harry replied, taking a seat on a stool a few feet away from the roaring fire. He pulled off his cloak and began rubbing his hands together, trying to bring them back to life. He’d regretted not wearing heavier clothing about four steps out the door, but stubbornly decided not to go back. He’d paid the price. Hagrid poured two cups of tea, and set one down on the fireplace next to Harry, then pulled a huge chair over, and sat down, Fang settling at his feet, dozing lazily.

“So, what brings yeh here?” Hagrid asked.

“Just thought I should come by, see how you were doing. I haven’t been very good about keeping up with you.”

“Well, yeh’ve been busy, there’s no denying that. I’m just glad yer here.”

“Have you had much company recently?” Harry asked. Hagrid’s hut was never exactly a pigsty, but he was observing a degree of organization and cleanliness far in excess of the usual.

“Oh, that. Yeah, I cleaned up a bit. It was time, anyway.”

“What did Madam Maxime think?” Harry asked, grinning at the much larger man.

"Blimey, Harry, yeh certainly didn't tiptoe around that one." Hagrid shook his bearded head. "Mind, I like 'er, but things...well, they could be better...yeh probably don't want ter hear 'bout this stuff anyway."

"No," Harry said, taking a sip of tea. As usual, it was scalding. He set it down, deciding to let it cool off another hundred degrees or so before trying again. "Do tell, Hagrid?"

"Well, yeh see, I opened me mouth without thinkin'..."

"Shocking, that."

Hagrid glared at him. "Arry..."

"Sorry," Harry said, meaning it. He seemed to have unintentionally struck a nerve.. "Go on."

"...Well, anyway, I asked 'er sommat I probably shouldnt've."

"Never ask a girl their weight, Hagrid."

Hagrid laughed. "Even *I* know *that*, 'Arry...that wasn't it...I asked...well, I asked 'er if it was 'er mother or 'er father..." His face fell.

Harry winced. "Well, there's no way that you were *wrong*. Human beings just don't get as big as she is on their own. She has to have some giant blood in her. And I bet she knows it."

"O'course she does, how could she not?" Hagrid asked rhetorically. "She's just in denial, and I don't blame 'er, o'course. With the way that the wizardin' world treats 'alf-giants like me an' 'er?...Don't matter anyway, she'll never talk teh me again..."

"I think you'd be surprised. Look, I'm no expert, but to me it would make more sense if she decided that acknowledging her heritage might finally bring her somebody that understands her."

"I 'ope yer right, 'Arry." He sighed, then smiled. "So, where's yer girlfriend?"

"Is it *that* obvious?" Harry asked, laughing.

"Come on, 'Arry. Yeh could tell just by lookin' at the two of yeh. Yer more than friends. And I'm real happy for teh both of yeh."

"Thank you," Harry replied. "So, what do you have planned for us when we get back from break?"

"Eh, I got a few things. No more Skrewts, though. Darn things got too big, and started killin' each other. I thought 'bout having yeh take 'em for a walk, work out the extra energy, but..."

"That was the right decision. No offense, Hagrid, but what exactly are Skrewts *good for*?"

"Well, yeh see...well, nothin', actually. I've never seen such amazing creatures, but so far as I can tell, they aren't really practical fer a lesson plan. I'm new at this, 'Arry, give me some time. Actually, I got the idea from that Slytherin girl, Parkinson?"

"Pansy gave you a *good* idea?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Well, not exactly...see I heard 'er complain 'bout the Skrewts...well, I 'eard a lot of people complain' 'bout the Skrewts...but she said yeh should be studyin' sommat useful...like unicorns."

"Unicorns?"

"Always 'ad a soft spot for 'em," Hagrid admitted. "Fantastic creatures, really...when I look at a unicorn, I see *purity*. Most beautiful creatures on teh planet, but they don't bother nobody. They give tail 'airs fer wands, an' get nothin' in return."

"From what I understand, they aren't always willing donors," Harry pointed out.

Hagrid shrugged it off. "Don't matter. Anyway, I was thinkin' I'd bring one in fer the next lesson. Maybe get some o' those parents off me back."

"They've been complaining?"

“Dumbledore says there have been some concerns.”

“They want you fired.”

Hagrid sighed. “Probably. So, I thought I should think more about the class, instead about meself.”

“A good lesson to learn. You’ll be fine, Hagrid...just...try to understand that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. You might think Skrewts are beautiful, but...”

“Yeah, yeah,” Hagrid said. “Others think they’re the ugliest thing they’ve ever seen. I know, ‘Arry. I know...oh, I just remembered. I got a letter from Remus yesterday. ‘E mentioned yeh.”

Harry had had almost no contact with Remus Lupin since he’d departed at the end of his Third Year, following a wild encounter in the woods in which he’d saved Harry’s life by chasing off another transformed werewolf, Fenrir Greyback. Harry had established a bit of a camaraderie with the man, and had been somewhat disappointed that he hadn’t written. Of course, Harry hadn’t either, but still... “How is he?”

“Fine. He’s in hidin’, but he’s also doing odd-jobs fer Dumbledore. He’d like teh hear from yeh. Seems ter think that yeh don’t care ‘bout him anymore.”

Harry was confused. “Why would he think that?”

“Remus has always kinda been like that,” Hagrid admitted. “Doesn’t think ‘e’s worth the air ‘e breathes. He ‘ides it well in public, but...I think it’d do him a lot o’ good if ‘e got a letter from his best friend’s son.”

Harry remembered Sirius’s pleas to the same effect. He hadn’t thought much of his Godfather recently. Some how, the mere thought of him, of what he claimed to represent, was enough to send in his mind into a confused spiral, and make him start questioning everything. He had to get over that. Even if he didn’t like Sirius, the man was doing all he could to change that, and he didn’t deserve a

cold shoulder in return. Guilt flooded his mind. "Yeah, I suppose I haven't been very good about that."

"Don't say it like its too late, 'cause it ain't," Hagrid reassured him. "I'll let yeh go, and yeh go off an write a letter for 'em, okay? By teh way, have you heard anything 'bout Sirius?"

"He's hiding in a cave about half a kilometer outside of Hogsmeade."

Hagrid whistled. "Never teh sharpest of teh lot. What's 'e doin', *trying* ter get captured and sent back ter Azkaban? Blimey!"

Harry shook his head. "He's watching over me, he feels it's his duty...I don't know, Hagrid, I just...I don't know what to think of him. He says all of these things that I'm not sure I believe, and he keeps putting this doubt in my mind which I just can't deal with right now. Yet I feel guilty for shutting him out."

Hagrid frowned. As insightful as the half-giant could be sometimes, he was far from an expert on interpersonal problems. "Sorry, 'Arry. I don't know what ter tell yeh. Give 'im a chance, though. 'E's a good man."

"So I've heard," Harry replied. "Alright, I'll go write something for Remus. Thanks for the company. I needed it. Hermione's still in Hospital Wing, and Ginny went home to see her family."

Hagrid's brow furrowed in confusion. "Where's Daphne?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. She's doing something for Dumbledore, and won't be back for a week or two."

"She'll be alrigh'. She's a tough one."

"I know," Harry said. "I think I'll get going, then."

"Alright, off yeh go. Thanks fer stoppin' by, 'Arry. Really 'ppreciated the company."

Harry left the hut and trudged back up to the castle, through the steadily falling snow and gusting wind. Finally, wet, cold, and

shivering, he staggered through the front doors and in to the Entrance Hall. He noticed McGonagall standing at the top of the stairs, adjusting a painting of three witches, who had probably flagged her down and were now thanking her, but she didn't say anything. Harry considered going down and writing a letter to Remus, as Hagrid had asked, but somehow, he knew that he needed to collect his thoughts, figure out what he was going to say and how he was going to say it. In addition, he was exhausted from his trek to and from Hagrid's hut. He decided that he'd take a quick midday nap before he'd put quill to parchment.

Writing a letter to Remus Lupin had proven to be harder than he'd first suspected, especially given how little communication they'd had, and the circumstances of his departure. He wasn't sure how Remus really was, what he was doing, or even where he was at the moment, but he had faith that Hedwig would ensure the letter reached him. He managed to get the greeting in before his mind locked up. He decided that he'd check in on Hermione.

When he entered the Hospital Wing and caught sight of his friend's bed, it was clear that she was better off than she'd been that morning. She was sitting up now, her injuries less visible from a distance, a large book in her lap. She looked up and smiled as he came toward her. "I was hoping you'd come around again. Ginny's already gone?"

Harry nodded and sat down next to her bed. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, although that's a relative term," she said. "Madam Pomfrey still won't let me out of bed, so I'm not sure how functional I am at this point. She says I'll only be another few days...it's just so frustrating that I can't remember anything about what happened after the ball...I just remember being mad at Viktor and then..." she gestured at her surroundings.

"What happened between you two, anyway?" he asked, curiosity finally getting the better of him.

Hermione's cheeks reddened a bit. "Just a stupid little fight. Viktor really likes me, you know. And so we were dancing on the floor, and he just...well, I *think* he was trying to kiss me, but for some reason I

got scared and yelled at him...I don't know what I was thinking, he didn't mean me any harm, for Merlin's sake. What does it say about me if that's the way that I react to the prospect of my first kiss? I really would like to see him soon, to make sure he knows that he didn't do anything wrong."

"I can arrange that," Harry said. "So, what happened, exactly?"

"Well...I kind of shoved him, but he didn't move...well, honestly he's so much bigger and stronger than I am that he probably barely felt it. He tried again...just for a little kiss, and I really knocked him back this time, and asked him what he thought he was doing...well, he seemed rather confused by that, probably used to girls wanting *him*, of course...I don't even remember the rest of the details. Bottom line is that I got angry with him out of my own insecurity and ruined both of our nights...then I somehow ended up in here."

"Well, I can't really speak for you, Hermione, but it doesn't sound like he meant anything by it. He was having fun, you were having fun, and I guess he thought..."

"Of course that's what he thought, and honestly, I can't blame him. I made a mess of things, not him. I just want to make sure he knows that."

"Do you think that you might keep this going?"

Hermione grimaced. "Honestly, I don't know Harry. I mean, as we talked it became readily apparent that we had almost nothing in common. I love books, he loves brooms...basically like that...and he likes me a lot more than I like him. I don't *dislike* him, of course, he's perfectly nice and quite polite, but I don't really feel much for him...*bloody hell*, everything's a mess...at least you and Ginny had a better time than we did. I've been waiting for this for ages."

"You got tired of waiting," Harry added. Hermione shrugged.

"It seemed like the only way to make anything happen. Besides, once Krum asked me, it removed any sense of obligation you might have somehow felt to ask me to the Ball. I wanted you and Ginny to go together the entire time."

"I understand that now, thanks." Something occurred to him. "Have you told your parents about what happened? I assume that they expected you home for Christmas."

Hermione frowned at him. "Of course not. I don't tell my parents about half the things that happen to me. They don't understand. They *can't* understand. It's just something that I've learned to live with. If they knew how many times I'd been in life-threatening situations, or understood the things that you were involved in, they'd pull me out straight-aways. I can't let that happen."

"Aren't you ever concerned they'll find out? And how did you explain this one?"

"I just told them that something related to my schoolwork had come up, and that I was staying to work on a project with you. I was rather vague about it, but...well, they trust me. Ironical since I've been lying to them to protect themselves from their own desire to keep me safe," she explained. "It isn't easy having to lie to your parents all the time, but it's the difference between Hogwarts with you and Ginny, and Muggle schooling with kids that don't appreciate me and don't like me. Not a very hard choice to make when you look at it like that."

"Personally, I'm glad you feel that way," Harry admitted. "Do you think you can really hide everything that goes on here?"

"I honestly don't know," Hermione said. "While they appreciate my success, they really don't understand what we do, and I sense they don't really want to understand. They are perfectly comfortable where they are, being successful dentists. They really don't have much curiosity when it comes to magic."

"Do you wish they did?"

"I suppose that I'd like to be able to talk about things with them, but I honestly can't blame them. They'd known me as this intelligent bookworm, and suddenly I can do things they've only read about in stories? And considering that if they knew more about magic, they might know how dangerous our world really is, I'm glad they don't bother to find out. We get along just fine during the summer. Mum's a

real avid reader, and I still like Muggle authors, so we have things to talk about.”

“Somehow I’m not exactly surprised.”

“Yeah, really...I don’t know, it’s a strange relationship, but if it works, I suppose there isn’t anything wrong with it. On the same note, what *is* your relationship like with Daphne, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Daphne...Daphne is a lot of things to me. She’s a mother, a mentor, a dueling instructor, and sometimes just a friend. I suppose I used to be closer to her, but she’s always been a bit distant. There are a lot of things we just don’t talk about. She’ll talk about the War sometimes, but rarely mention my parents or her husband...I don’t know if it’s a healthy relationship, but I love her, and she’s done so much for me. She’s made some mistakes, but what parent hasn’t?”

“Right...” Hermione said, although the hesitation in her voice made her skepticism pretty clear. “She *has* been through a lot.”

“I worry about her, sometimes. I worry that as collected as she appears, inside...she’s not quite right. It’s probably nothing,” Harry said. He knew that he was lying to himself, and to Hermione. But he still had faith that she remained a capable and bright witch...if a bit unstable. “She’s done things, obviously. Horrible things, even.” Harry had to fight off memories of the Chamber of Secrets. *She didn’t know what she was doing. She was out of control, trying to help me and Ginny. Riddle was toying with her, and she got angry. She snapped. It happens. She hates herself for doing it. She knows it was wrong, that she made mistakes she can’t afford to make...*

Even *if* he believed all of that, there was no denying that she’d grown steadily more distant from him starting at that point. Harry wasn’t sure if that was a bad thing. Daphne had begun treating him as if he was older than he was. He didn’t have a problem with that. He certainly didn’t *need* the constant hugs and soft words anymore. He needed a mentor, and Daphne had, without hesitation, stepped cleanly into that role. The change had been healthy for both of them.

“...Harry, are you alright?” Hermione asked, bringing him out of his thoughts.

"Fine," he replied. A little *too* quickly.

Hermione bit her bottom lip. "Are you sure? Do you want to talk about it?"

"No...no, I'm fine. Really," he said, forcing a smile. "She loves me, Hermione. And I love her. It might not be a conventional mother-son relationship..."

"I can't help but notice that you're referring to her as your mother again," Hermione said. "The last few years, you've been calling her your guardian."

"Your *point*?" Harry asked, a little more frustration showing than he'd intended. Hermione flinched. "I'm sorry."

"It was a stupid question," she said.

"Maybe...I guess I just become a bit self-conscious. Lily was my mother. Daphne...as much as she's done for me, she can't be what Lily was. Daphne took me in, raised me, *protected* me. I suppose that as I've matured, I've understood the role she truly played. That of guardian, of mentor. She wasn't hard on me, but it's been a while since she showered me with love. That just isn't her way. And I don't *need* it anymore."

"I understand," Hermione said. Harry wasn't sure if he believed her, but he gave her the benefit of the doubt.

"Hermione," he suddenly asked. "Has Madam Pomfrey checked you for a Memory Charm? That might explain why you can't remember what happened."

"Can Malfoy *perform* a Memory Charm, assuming that it was him?"

"Somehow I don't think he cared if he fried your brain or not. For once I'll be grateful that he did something right."

"*If* it was a Memory Charm," Hermione cautioned. "A concussion could also explain my inability to recall what happened."

"Yes, there's that. But Malfoy's just cocky enough to try something stupid like that. And he wouldn't care if he overdid it."

"That's a scary thought," Hermione admitted. She paused. "So, what are you going to do about it? Not that I'm *asking* you to do anything; I just know that you'll do something whether I want you to or not. And as much as I'd like to make him regret hurting me, I don't want you to get hurt in the process."

"I'm going to challenge him to a duel, beat him, and neutralize him," Harry said.

"Sounds pretty simple," Hermione replied, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "How do you plan to get Malfoy into a duel that he can't get out of? Unsupervised dueling by students is against the rules. Malfoy will care about that if he can use it to save his own skin."

"Old pureblood laws supersede school regulation. I think that I can claim you as family for that purpose, and accuse Malfoy of a grave offense against you. Hopefully the wizards that came up with the laws decided against excluding Muggleborns."

"Is this really the best course of action? If Malfoy did this to me, I'd like to get back at him, too, but might you get even in a slightly less...violent way? Get him expelled?"

"I have no evidence. Lucius Malfoy is a member of the School's Board of Directors, and the only person that might back me up, Snape, is Draco's *godfather*. He won't betray Lucius. I'm on my own, but I can't let him get away with this."

Hermione sighed. "In the past I might have begged you not to do it. But I've since learned it isn't really worth the effort."

"There's another thing I've got on my plate," Harry said, then explained the details of his conversation with Hagrid, and his promise to re-establish contact with Lupin.

Hermione was insistent. "Go on, right now, go write that letter. I'll be fine. I've got some reading to do anyway. I agree *completely* with Hagrid; it's really important that you write that letter, Harry."

"I know," he admitted. "I'm just having difficulty figuring out what to talk about. Our relationship was rather...awkward to begin with, and with everything that's happened this year...I don't want to make him even more worried."

"Don't concern yourself with that. Right now the only news that Remus is getting is probably through secondary sources and the *Daily Prophet*. Even though Skeeter hasn't written anything really scandalous about you, it's not exactly telling the whole story. Actually, it seems like she's trying to forget that you even exist, and focusing on the other three champions."

"So I should fill in the gaps? Tell him everything? Blimey, Hermione, he might go as nutters as Sirius, and come out of hiding to try to whisk me away."

Hermione shook her head. "He isn't like that, and you know it. He understands you, Harry, much better than Sirius seems to. Sirius can't get past the differences that you have with James. Remus doesn't want you to be your father. He tried really hard to get to know you last year, Harry. If I've read him correctly, he doesn't do that all that often."

"He's always been shy, from what I've heard. That trait has only gotten worse since my parents died, Sirius was sent to Azkaban, and Pettigrew went into hiding as Scabbers," Harry said. "Alright, I'll do it. But in exchange, as soon as you are up to it, I want you to help me with a few things."

"Depends on what you are asking," Hermione said. "If it isn't much, you needn't look upon it as a favor. I'm just encouraging you to do something you should have already done, and something that you know you need to do out of common *decency*. You shouldn't look upon it as a *burden*."

"I don't," Harry said defensively. "I didn't mean it like *that*." He realized that he'd chosen his words poorly, and felt guilty. Hermione was right. Writing Remus was something he *should* do.

"What do you need?"

"I need help deciphering the Egg Clue."

"Don't be daft, Harry, I'll help you with that whether you ask me to or not."

"...And I need you to help me examine some of the material Daphne sent me to determine if I can include you in my extended family, and thus can challenge Draco to a duel he can't get out of."

Hermione bit her lower lip, but said, "Done. Off you go. I'm not going anywhere."

Harry put down his quill, and tried to massage some of the cramps and aches out of his right hand, as he examined the parchment in front of him. Writing to Lupin hadn't been easy, but he'd eventually decided that he'd best be honest and hope that the werewolf would understand.

Dear Remus,

I hope this letter finds you well, and I want to apologize in advance for waiting as long as I have to contact you. I did at the very good advice of an old friend, who thought you would appreciate hearing from me.

This year's been eventful at best, difficult at worst. Obviously, the biggest thing on my plate has been the Triwizard Tournament. In case you weren't sure, I didn't enter myself. Professor Moody's suspicions of a plot against my life are looking a lot less paranoid given the unusually violent behavior of the dragon I was facing. I'm going to be very careful going into the Second Task. Something is amiss, Remus.

I suppose that as a Gryffindor, it might be difficult for you to understand the intricacies of the intra-house rivalries of Slytherin. I've also gained some allies as well as enemies, including Daphne Greengrass and her father, Aiden. I was invited to a very special ceremony along with the Zabini family, and it seems that a formal alliance will be formed in the near future.

I've also been forced to contend with Draco Malfoy. His father's stature in the pureblood community, itself a product of his status in Voldemort's ranks during the last war, has made him my principal rival. He's not exactly cunning or brilliant, but his surname commands respect and fear that I can't match. I had hoped to deal with him by other means, but I suspect he was behind the recent attack after the Yule Ball that left Hermione in the Hospital Wing. She's alright, but I cannot let that stand.

Another thing that I'd like you to know is that I finally asked Ginny Weasley to the Yule Ball, and that I think we have something very special. She's bright, ferocious, and seems to understand me at times better than I do. We'll have to see what happens, but I'm excited to find out.

I haven't had much contact with Padfoot since meeting him in person earlier this term. I just have trouble relating to him, Remus. He doesn't approve of the choices that I've made, nor the upbringing that he believes has caused me to make those decisions. I guess he still clings to this hope that James can somehow be brought back to life through me. But the truth is that I've got almost nothing in common with him, outside of the Quidditch skills I inherited from him. I honestly don't know what to do with him. Maybe you have some advice, or maybe you can talk to him for me, explain things in a way that I can't. I'd appreciate any help you could give, because I know my father would want me and Padfoot to get along with each other.

Daphne's been sent away by Dumbledore, as I suspect you might already know. I'm spending the Holidays with Hermione while she heals. Ginny went home to see her family.

Wish you well,

Harry

Content, Harry rolled up the parchment and wrapped a ribbon around it. He donned some heavier robes, and then headed out of the dungeon for the Owlery, digging out a dozen or so Owl treats before he departed.

As it turned out, he'd need them. Hedwig refused to look at him before he'd given her about half of them. Harry hadn't seen much of her this year, and she was making sure he remembered that fact. He gently stroked her beautiful plumage, and she cooed in response. Still, it took the rest of the owl treats that he'd brought with him before she'd allow him to tie the roll of parchment onto her leg. "Thanks, girl," he said.

Hedwig still looked unhappy, and nudged him with her head. "I'm sorry I haven't seen you that often," he said. "I've been rather busy, but I promise to visit more." Once he was fairly certain his owl was content, he continued. "I need you to take this to Remus," he told her. "You remember him."

Hedwig hooted an affirmative. Remus and Harry had run into each other at the Owlery once, and he'd been very kind and complimentary toward Hedwig. His semi-narcissistic owl wouldn't soon forget that kind of treatment. "I'm not sure where he is, but..."

Hedwig indicated that it wouldn't be a problem. "Thanks, girl," he told her. "Ready to go then?" She nodded.

Harry was confident that between a security spell that Daphne had taught him and Hedwig's cunning and skill, the letter would not be intercepted. In case it was, he hasn't mentioned Sirius Black by name, or revealed his location, but there was plenty of other sensitive information in there that he didn't want anyone to know about. Hedwig gave him one last nod, then spread her wings and soared out of the Owlery, flying away into the snow-covered mountains and hills. Harry heard a noise behind him, and turned quickly, unconsciously cocking his wrist.

He relaxed when he saw who it was. Cedric Diggory, bundled in a yellow jacket, had just come up the stairs into the Owlery, carrying a small package. He stopped when he saw Harry. "Didn't expect to find anyone up here," he admitted. "I thought everyone had gone home for the week."

"My guardian is...away," Harry explained. "Why didn't you go home?"

"Same reason," Cedric said, sighing. "Well, not exactly...Dad's been sent to France by the Ministry, some sort of international magical cooperation deal...Mum's visiting her family in Wales. She asked me to come but, well...I'm not really that fond of her sisters."

Harry smiled, thinking of the stories he'd heard of his Aunt Petunia. "I can understand...sending something to her?" He gestured at the package Cedric was carrying.

"Yeah," he said. "Just a little gift, something I made in Charms class when Flitwick gave us some time to work on our own. Didn't get a chance to send it before now...you mind?"

"Of course not," Harry replied hurriedly, realizing he'd moved to block the Hufflepuff's access to the owls. Cedric whistled, and his owl flew to land on his arm.

"His name is Kalas," Cedric said. The owl was slightly larger than Hedwig, brown with dozens of white spots. He seemed quite close to his master. "Father bought him for me when I was eight. Served me faithfully ever since. Yours?"

"She's named Hedwig," Harry said. "She's a snowy owl, got her when I turned eleven. I just sent her out with a letter."

"For your guardian?"

"Yes," Harry lied. He wasn't particularly interested in discussing the actual destination of his correspondence, as much as he liked Cedric.

"I'm sure she'll be happy to hear from you," Diggory said. "So, have you had any breakthroughs with the Egg Clue?"

"Why are you asking?" was Harry's response.

"Just curious, I suppose," Cedric said. "I'm not trying to steal any of your ideas."

"Plain curiosity might be a bit of a stretch in this case, but I'll tell you anyway," Harry replied. "I haven't had any breakthroughs, although I

do have some ideas. I haven't really had much time recently to work on it, though."

"Right," the other Hogwarts Champion said, his eyes searching Harry, possibly to determine how honest he was being. "Yeah, I've been pretty busy too. What with Christmas and the Ball and all...oh," he said, almost as an afterthought, "I heard about what happened to your friend, Hermione Granger. Terrible thing, that. Who would do something like that?"

"A few people," Harry said. "I have to admit, it's a spectacular blend of cowardice, gall, and stupidity. One that only a few people I know are capable of."

"You think it's someone you know?" Cedric asked.

"I guess it's probably difficult for a Hufflepuff to understand the concept, and I mean no offense by that, by the way...but House *loyalty* in Slytherin is something that exists more in concept than in practice."

"None taken," Cedric replied. "I guess that was a rather roundabout *compliment* of my House's loyalty."

"It was intended as such, yes," Harry said. "Slytherin isn't another word for evil wizard as some might have you believe, but with cunning, ambition, and instincts for self-preservation come betrayal, and all the other less appealing aspects of intra-house politics. As a Hufflepuff, I'd assume you'd be considerably less familiar with those than I am."

"I'll agree with you there," Cedric said, smiling amicably. A slight frown crossed his face. "I did notice your choice of words...most people would have said *Dark* rather than *evil*."

"It *was* intentional," Harry said. "The two words are not synonyms."

Cedric's frown was considerably more pronounced this time. "I guess it might be an exaggeration to call them that, but surely not much of one."

“Just because the Ministry would have you believe that Dark wizards are somehow more *dangerous* than Light wizards doesn’t mean that *you* should believe it,” Harry said, the level of his voice rising. “It’s a difference in philosophy, nothing more. It doesn’t mean that one method is right or wrong, and it doesn’t mean that one is used for good and the other for evil.”

“You really believe that?” Cedric asked, sounding incredulous.

Harry tried to calm his breathing, and to rationalize Cedric’s ignorance and rigid thinking. The Diggorys were an old Light family, albeit one that had never risen to great prominence. Cedric’s family had an unspectacular history of servitude and loyalty to the Ministry and to the Light. Rather than an argument, perhaps he should look upon this as an opportunity. But he’d need to play this carefully to avoid alienating Cedric, and losing this chance to maybe make some inroads outside of Slytherin.

“I do,” he finally replied. “I won’t deny that most Slytherins come from Dark families, and former students of that House show an overwhelming tendency to choose the Dark when they come of age...”

“That’s another thing,” Cedric said. “Why is it that Dark wizards *choose* to be Dark, but Light wizards are just...normal.”

“It’s a tradition that Dark purebloods have followed and Light purebloods have set aside, nothing more than that. It’s probably also a symbol of defiance, an act of setting oneself apart from the Light-dominated government. The only times that Dark wizards have controlled the Ministry, they’ve been tyrants that were eventually defeated. Dark families prefer to work behind the scenes, while Light families remain in the spotlight.”

Cedric gave him a curious look. “You’ve certainly got some interesting ideas. You’re making arguments I’ve never heard before.”

“You can’t deny that they make sense,” Harry said. “There are more Light wizards than Dark wizards...at the most, it’s only a 2-to-1 ratio. Because there isn’t a representative legislative body anymore, the Wizards’ Council having been replaced by the popularly elected Minister of Magic, the Dark purebloods have little say in the

government. The Light Ministry is allowed to make the laws, but they rarely interfere in the affairs of the Dark families.”

“Purebloods in general are left mostly alone,” Cedric agreed. “Really, the Ministry exists to protect the Statute of Secrecy and the interests of the magical community as a whole. But with all that power vested in one man...”

“It’s a terribly corrupt system,” Harry finished. “The only thing that’s allowed it to survive as long as it has is the small size of the wizarding community in England and the hands-off approach it has taken to enforcing its rule. The Ministry can’t come down on Dark families, so it creates and reinforces taboos about them, the goblins, and anyone else who might stand to threaten the Ministry’s power.”

Cedric chuckled in amazement. “I suppose there were reasons that I never thought about it like that. My father’s a *part* of that system, Harry, and he believes in it.”

“I didn’t mean to undermine your faith in the Ministry,” Harry admitted. “I guess that the conversation just went in that direction and I ran with it. My point is that your perceptions of Slytherins and Dark wizards in general are flawed to say the least. I’m currently quite involved with a noted Dark pureblood family, and they *are* decent people.”

“So why tell me all of this?” Cedric asked. “What are you hoping to accomplish?”

“I’ll admit I went farther than I had intended, but I just wanted to make you understand. And because others look up to you...”

“You want me to help make your case.”

“...sort of,” Harry admitted. “What I’d like is a friend besides Hermione Granger outside of Slytherin. I used to be friends with some of the Ravenclaws, but they haven’t been as fond of me since the attacks during my second year.”

“Right,” Cedric said. “I believe you were the victim there, but I think others aren’t as sure. So they are suspicious of you to begin with, and then you suddenly end up in the Tournament, in clear violation of the

rules, and it looks like you cheated the system. I'm frankly surprised Rita Skeeter hasn't written some scathing articles about that. It's her style."

Harry couldn't hide his smile. "That it is."

"You did something," Cedric said. It wasn't a question. "Wow, Potter. Based on what I've heard so far, and the fact that you somehow silenced Rita Skeeter...to say I'm a bit surprised is an understatement."

"I don't want you to be my cheerleader. I don't even need you to *agree* with me. I just would like to know that someone with influence among the other students actually thinks that I'm a decent person."

Cedric was silent for a long moment. "Potter, that's all well and good, but why the rush? I mean, you seem *really* concerned with things that, well...other boys your age...and mine, don't really think much about? It almost sounds like you are trying to gather allies, supporters. And you are starting with your peers."

Harry didn't respond. He just held Cedric's gaze, which told the Hufflepuff Seeker everything he wanted to know. "So that's what you are doing? *Why*? Is there some threat out there, something you need to deal with? I mean, You-Know-Who's been gone, *dead* for over a decade-

"He *isn't*," Harry bit out.

Cedric's eyes went wide. "What?"

"He isn't *dead*," Harry repeated. "His body was destroyed, but he didn't die. He was wounded, badly, basically the nearest thing to death. But he survived, Cedric. He survived the rebound of his curse. He fled, went into hiding. He's been healing, regaining strength, waiting for the moment to strike again."

"You can't be serious," Cedric said, aghast. "He's dead, Potter. *Everyone* knows that..."

"I *fought* him, Cedric," Harry said. "I fought him during my First Year, fought him for control of the Philosopher's Stone, and damn near died doing it. Hermione too. He possessed Quirrell, fed off of him, to infiltrate Hogwarts."

"I can't...this is *unbelievable*, Potter," Cedric said. "Why doesn't anyone else know? Surely Dumbledore..."

"Dumbledore knows," Harry confirmed. "But think about it: who would believe it even if we did make it common knowledge? And we can't allow Voldemort to know that we know. He's rebuilding slowly, but he'll hurry up if he knows he's vulnerable. I don't know *all* the details," he admitted. "But I know that Dumbledore is getting ready." Harry noticed that Cedric, like almost every other witch or wizard, flinched when he said the Dark Lord's name.

"Why are you telling me this? If the knowledge is as restricted as you say, then why?"

"Because I *trust* you," Harry said. "I trust your intentions. I trust your judgment. And above all, I trust that you will heed my warnings and not allow this knowledge to spread any further. I didn't come up here *planning* to tell you, but you should know. Now you understand why I'm doing what I'm doing. Why I'm so interested in gaining allies in other houses."

"But...surely, they can't expect you...I mean, I know you survived You-Know-Who's attack the first time, but...you're just a kid! Why is this *your* responsibility."

Harry stared into Cedric's eyes, trying to convince the other boy that he was being as honest as he possibly could. "I can't tell you that, Cedric. I can't tell you why I feel the need to do what I do. But I implore you to believe me when I say I have good reasons. I've accepted what I need to do. But I need help."

Cedric seemed to gather his thoughts, to run through everything he had just heard in his mind. Then he moved closer, and stuck out his hand, before drawing it back. "Pot...Harry," he began. "We're still rivals in the Tournament."

“Of course. You’ll do your best to win, and so will I.”

Cedric nodded, then repeated the earlier gesture, holding it this time. “Then I’m with you. I’ll do what I can, maybe make people more receptive to you. I can’t promise anything but...”

“You’ve already done all you needed to,” Harry said. “You’ve believed me. You gave me a chance. That’s all I want.”

“Then I’ll give you that chance...Harry, if you don’t mind, I *do* need to send my parcel sooner or later...”

Harry smiled. “Of course. Thank you, Cedric.”

“No problem. Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me. I’ll remember, and I’ll do what I can.”

With another nod, Harry slipped past the Hufflepuff and descended the Owlery steps, wondering...*hoping* that he’d done the right thing. *Praying* that he hadn’t just made a terrible mistake.

Somehow, he knew that wasn’t the case.

Harry’s next surprise was equally pleasant. He’d been wandering through the corridors of Hogwarts when he spotted her. It wasn’t all that difficult, she was wearing her favorite shade of bubblegum pink hair, longer than he was accustomed too, but still impossible to miss.

“Tonks!” he yelled, rushing over to greet her. “What are you doing here?”

“Wotcher, Harry!” his close friend replied. She enveloped him in a bone-crushing hug, one that left him dizzy from a lack of oxygen. Still, he was as pleased to see her as she was to see him.

Tonks grinned madly at him. She wore the bright red robes of the Aurors, although it meant that her hair clashed horribly with the rest of her attire...not that she seemed to care. “How’s everything going?” she asked. “Haven’t heard from you in months! Thought you’d forgotten all ‘bout me!”

“Never,” Harry promised her. There were few things in the world that could make him feel better than the presence of the twenty-something Metamorphmagus, the daughter of Daphne’s good friend Andromeda. “Just trying to survive the holidays. Daphne’s been sent away by Dumbledore, so I’m on my own...well, me and Hermione,” he amended.

“Where is your bushy-haired friend?” Tonks asked.

Harry’s smile faded. “She’s in the Hospital Wing. Somebody attacked her after the Yule Ball.”

Tonks frowned, and her pink hair seemed to darken slightly. “What kind of rat bastard would do something like that?” she asked angrily.

“The kind that’s related to you,” Harry replied. “Why don’t you come up with me and see her? Do you have some time to yourself?”

“Oh, sure, love to,” Tonks replied, more cheerful this time.

They made their way up to the Hospital Wing, and found Hermione with a massive book on her chest. She was so engrossed in whatever she was reading that she didn’t look up as they entered. Tonks gestured for Harry to stay put, then carefully slunk toward the bed, moving around it in a crouch, obviously intending to pop up and surprise her. Or, she would have, had she not tripped over an empty bedpan and stumbled to the floor. Hermione dropped the book on her lap and looked around, trying to figure out what had happened. Harry fell back against the wall, howling with laughter.

Tonks, looking embarrassed but no worse for the wear, got to her feet with a weak, “Wotcher, Hermione.”

“Tonks!” Hermione exclaimed. “How’d you end up on the floor?”

Harry was hit with another fit of laughter, one that left him breathless and barely able to stand.

“Trying to surprise you,” Tonks mumbled. “You! Stop that!” she yelled at Harry.

"Can't help it," Harry got out. "Funniest thing I've seen in months."

"Always happy to entertain," the young Auror replied. "Damn, they told me that the clumsiness might go away when I got older. So much for that. I'm as much of a klutz now as I was as a teenager."

"Is that a side-effect of your abilities?" Hermione asked. Harry hadn't considered that possibility before.

"Probably," Tonks said. "Got really bad when I turned thirteen, coordination's been awful ever since. Mum and the rest of her family certainly don't have that problem. Dad was a bit uncoordinated, so I'd say it's a combination of bad genes and being a Metamorphmagus. You haven't had any problems, though."

Hermione seemed confused for a moment, then seemed to remember Harry's earlier success at slightly changing his appearance. Harry shook his head. "Tonks, to be perfectly honest with you, I haven't been practicing all that much. But when I have, I seem to be regressing. I can't get my eyes to do anything anymore, and my hair color seems rather fixed as well."

Tonks considered that, and her smile fell a little. "Since they are so rare, Metamorph talents aren't all that well understood. 'Suppose it's possible that you've outgrown them, or something. Maybe we'll give it another go this summer? In the meantime," she said turning to Hermione, "I hear my inbred cousin is responsible for you ending up here? Where is the bastard? I'll nail him to the wall and feed his eyeballs to Hedwig!"

"That's Harry's theory," Hermione said. "I have to admit it makes sense. And if it was him, he's not going to get away with it."

"I'll take care of him," Harry told her again.

"What are you planning?" Tonks asked.

"I'm going to challenge him to a duel," Harry replied.

"Alright with me, as long as you beat his arse. Sure I can't have a go at him?"

"You'll get your chance," Harry promised. "But this is about *me*, and I'm not going to let him get away with hurting my friends."

"Harry, with all due respect, and as much as I appreciate how much you care for me, I'd rather I didn't just remain an innocent *victim* here," Hermione protested. "And I'd rather you didn't get yourself hurt or expelled on my behalf. I'm capable of standing up for myself."

"She's got a point, you know," Tonks told him.

"Leave him to me," Harry said. "I'm sorry Hermione, but it's *me* he wants, and it's *me* he's going to get. I'm going to end this, and I'm going to end this *my* way. I don't mean to insinuate that you need me to ride to your rescue every time. But this nonsense with Malfoy has gone far enough. I've got enough distractions already. I need to end this, and I need to end this *now*."

Hermione nodded. "Alright, I'll go with you on this." She held up the book she'd been reading. Harry read the title off the spine. *The Ancient, the Antiquated, and the Anachronistic: Pureblood Rights and Rituals*. On the bedside table was another old and work tome: *Vestiges of a More "Civilized" Age: A Modern Take on Old Wizarding Laws, and Their Relevance in Today's Society*.

"Where on earth did you find those?" Harry asked.

"Well, *I* didn't," Hermione said, her cheeks a bit pink. "Dobby did. I normally wouldn't ask a House-Elf to do my work for me...you know how I feel about the way they are treated..."

Harry had heard Hermione's opinion's on the subject more than once.

"...well, anyway, he came to visit me during one of his breaks a few hours ago...quite kind of him, really, and he asked who had done this to me."

"You told him it was a Malfoy."

Hermione winced. "Yes. Considering that he used to work for them, that wasn't the best idea. I think Dobby wanted to avenge me all by himself."

"You talked him out of it, I hope," Harry said.

Hermione nodded. "But he still wanted to help...so I told him what you needed, and he volunteered...before I could stop him he was gone, and he came back a half-hour later, with these. Found them in the Restricted Section."

"What were they doing there?" Tonks asked. "Don't sound all that dangerous."

"Probably because they'd give students bad ideas. There are all kinds of ridiculous rights in here...including all kinds of justifications for duels," Hermione explained.

"Then you found what I was looking for?" Harry asked, suddenly excited.

Hermione hesitated, then nodded. "I was just getting into it when Tonks tripped over the bedpan. Listen to this: *While you might hear older wizards yearn for a more "civilized" age, the reality is that the times they speak of were anything but. As has already been explained, ceremonial duels were once the most conventional way of settling arguments and disputes, and it was one of many protected practices that allowed wizards and witches of all ages to get away with what was essentially murder.*"

"Inbred scum," Tonks growled. Harry ignored her.

"I know all of this," Harry said, giving her a pointed look. "*And* I know how you feel about it."

Hermione groaned. "Fine. Sorry for trying to give you a history lesson."

"I'm sorry...I didn't mean..."

"No, I know *exactly* what you meant," she replied curtly. She flipped forward a few pages. "This is what you were looking for." She began reading.

“There has been much debate over the centuries by wizards of both the Dark and Light over what offenses –and who had to be offended – provided adequate justification for an unregulated duel. It has been the general consensus that if a witch or wizard committed an offense, be it a verbal insult, an unprovoked act of magic, or a physical blow, to a member of the challenger’s blood family, then it was within that witch or wizard’s right to challenge the offender to a duel. It was also agreed that the witch or wizard making the challenge would be allowed to determine the time and place of the duel, as well as any basic guidelines. But many contended that the offender was not required to accept the challenge if the offense was not committed against a family member.”

Harry’s spirits sunk. “In other words, because you aren’t related to me, I’ve got nothing to force Malfoy to accept. I’ve got no case.”

Hermione glared at him. “I’m not finished yet. Do you want to here the rest or what?”

Harry gestured for her to continue. Tonks was listening intently. Clearly, she wanted her cousin to pay for the attack on her friend. *“Anyway...Despite this, there was also a general push for the rules to be amended, to allow a witch or wizard to defend the honor of a close friend or allied family. In one of the last official acts of the Wizards’ Council, the Charter of Dueling was amended for the eighteenth time, and new rules were added to allow a witch or wizard to protect the honor of a non-family member. While dueling would fall out of favor in the coming years, and become more of a curiosity than an accepted practice, and the creation of the Wizengamot as a judiciary body allowed disputes to be settled without violence, the Charter of Dueling was never officially annulled, despite many efforts to void it in the last century. Each time, a prominent Light witch or wizard gathered support, but was defeated by the united resistance of the prominent Dark families, who sought to protect their special status as pureblood nobility.”* Harry waited for Hermione to put down the book this time, then asked the question that had been bothering him.

“What about Muggleborns? How do the rules apply to them?”

"They don't," Hermione replied. "There's not a *single* mention of Muggleborns in any of the old laws. I think that it's implied that the dueling laws only apply to purebloods. And one other thing: in 1836, the Ministry managed to pass a law that decreed that deaths resulting from duels would be treated the same as any other murder, with the convicted sent to Azkaban for life."

"I don't intend to kill Draco, if that's what you are worrying about," Harry said quietly.

"I never thought you did. I'm just warning you to be careful. Besides, there are school rules that forbid dueling."

"She's got a point there," Tonks said. "Dumbledore likes you, Harry, but I doubt he'll let this happen. Sets a bad example. He can't have students settling arguments over name-calling by throwing spells at each other. It'll be complete chaos, anarchy...not that that's always a bad thing, mind..."

"Then he won't know about it until it's too late to stop it," Harry said. "Daphne will back me on this, and it sounds like the law is on our side."

"Outdated and barbaric as it is, yes," Hermione concurred. "I'll keep doing research, to see if I can come up with any other good arguments."

"Thanks," Harry said, meaning it. "So, while Muggleborns aren't mentioned, are Half-Bloods?"

"Like yourself, you mean?" Hermione asked. He nodded. The term Half-blood was generally used to refer to both witches and wizards with one wizarding parents, and witches and wizards with a Muggleborn parent. "No. No mention of them either, and considering how comprehensive this work is, I'd say that goes for the laws themselves."

"I'll run it by Daphne when she gets back. I'm going to make this work, Hermione. I promise you that."

“Just be careful,” Hermione said in a low voice. “Don’t underestimate him.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Harry assured her. “You’ll see.”

Hermione gave a nod, then frowned at Tonks and asked. “What are you doing here anyway? Are you just visiting Harry?”

Tonks grinned. “Well, if I said yes, I’d also be saying that I wear these awful robes because I *enjoy* it...no, I’m just babysitting Cornelius Fudge...changing his diaper, calming him when he gets all riled up...” All three of them laughed.

“Seriously, Tonks,” Harry said, finally regaining his composure. “Why’s Fudge here anyway?”

“He’s meeting with Dumbledore and...” she made a face. “...Lucius Malfoy and a few other members of the Board of Governors, plus Crouch and his assistant. Discussing finances, how the Tournament’s going, maybe some curriculum issues...e’ did seem rather touchy today, though. Something’s bothering him ‘bout this meeting.”

“Dumbledore?” Hermione asked.

“Fudge,” Tonks replied. “I didn’t see Dumbledore. Me and the other Auror that came along, Fudge’s little minion, Dawlish, aren’t allowed to sit in on the proceedings. Probably put me right to sleep anyway. I should probably go, though,” she said, checking the clock on the wall. “Meeting’s only supposed to last another fifteen minutes, and Fudge only brought me along because Dawlish’s partner had taken ill.”

“Alright, thanks for stopping by,” Harry said.

“Thanks for running into me,” she said. “Never would have thought either of you would still be here. Bye Hermione! Bye Harry!”

“Bye Tonks!” they replied in unison.

With that, the young Auror made her exit, carefully scanning the floor for any more exposed bedpans. She’d just gotten outside into the

corridor when they heard the sounds of two people colliding, and the shattering of glass.

Snape's roar might have been heard in London. "*DAMN IT, NYMPHADORA!*"

A/N: Alright, this chapter was almost exclusively devoted to character development, which, in some cases, was badly needed. Especially in the case of our favorite Gryffindor bookworm. You'll get an even more enlightening peek inside her head two chapters from now. There was also a concerning lack of Tonks in this fanfic, a problem that I was compelled to address.

The relationship between Harry and Daphne is complicated and yet extremely simple. I tried to let Harry's answers and thoughts answer that question. And it's a damn good one: "How, after everything she's done wrong, including inadvertently torturing him, can he still trust he so absolutely?"

McGonagall is going to have a bigger role moving forward. I use her often as a voice of reason, as well as a strong, powerful witch. That she's not the head of Harry's house doesn't mean she's irrelevant to him. You'll see what I mean.

Trying to write this fanfic while dealing with real life can be tough at times, and it means that I sometimes forget things. Like the character of Remus Lupin. While it should be implied that there is quite a bit of personal interaction going on that I don't put into writing, I, and therefore Harry, forgot about him. Hence, as I've had to do, I had to make an excuse for it, and fit it into the context of the story.

I also sometimes jump into things without really thinking them over. The complete failure of Blaise Zabini as a likable character in SoD is probably the best example I can think of. As content as Harry is with Ginny and Hermione, methinks a little male companionship is needed. Neville is going to take a while to come around. So I'm going to try it with Blaise again, from a different angle. Also, as you could probably tell, I've given up on the metamorph abilities of Harry. While they were originally used as a way to make Tonks and Harry closer, I honestly thought I might use them. I've since changed my mind. It

doesn't make sense. Harry's role is that of a leader. Hiding who he is doesn't make sense for a person in that position. Harry isn't nearly as helpless as he is in canon, and he has strong, adult figures willing to defend him that he didn't have in canon (Daphne, Snape, Aiden, etc.).

Harry's conversation with Cedric wasn't just a thing I did to make to improve the relationship between them. It's going to be extremely important in the context of the story. After all, if Harry wants allies, isn't *loyalty* one of the traits he most desires? Hufflepuff tends to get overlooked by some writers, but I really want to make them integral to the story.

Sirius has probably come off rather badly so far, for both you readers and Harry. Something to consider about him in SoD was that he was constantly on the run, desperate. He might be a bit more likable once he has a chance to settle down. Still, the relationship he and Harry will have is nothing like what they've got in canon. And there are certain parts of Harry's personality that violently clash with Sirius's beliefs. I didn't mean to make anyone hate him, though. His use of the Imperius Curse was out of sheer desperation, and he was disgusted by his own actions.

I've been going back through the previous parts of the series, editing a bit, but mostly trying to avoid the contradictions and omissions that keep getting me into trouble.

On that note, I know that my beta and I miss things. I know from personal experience that they can be annoying and distracting. I really want to get this series done as fast as I can, and most of all, I want to make sure I actually write the entire thing. So I probably don't spend as much time editing as I should. I don't mind readers pointing things out, and I'll try to fix them as best I can.

In honor of JKR finishing up the Harry Potter series (of which I have some observations and notes on its relation to my series to follow, as well as the 5th movie), I spent about an hour laying out some basic framework for the next three parts of the series. I've got some pretty cool and, so far as I can tell, mostly original stuff planned. I've decided to avoid writing out notes chapter by chapter, because every time I've tried that, my fingers have taken me waaay off of what I had

planned. With the feel I've got for writing this thing, I feel more comfortable letting the dialogue and events sort of flow on their own.

Spoiler Alert: Do Not Continue Reading Unless You have Completed Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.

Thank You.

Seriously, I dissect practically every part of DH you don't want to know about. So it's not my fault if you don't stop reading.

Okay, let me start off by saying that I think Rowling did a terrific job given the monstrous task set before her. DH was entertaining, compelling, and had more than enough suspense and angst to deprive me of sleep as I could put the thing down.

That said, I did have some problems with it, and hence, there are certain aspects I will pretend don't exist for the purposes of this story. As I normally try to give you readers an understanding of why I choose to do certain things, I wanted to give you an idea of what to expect, and what I liked and didn't like about the way Rowling ended it.

1. I'm going to reiterate that **there will be NO Horacruxes in the Grey Maiden Series**. None. Period. The Diary was one of a kind.

Look, I hated Horacruxes from the second they were introduced in HBP. I seriously feared that DH would turn into a video game, complete with bosses every level. Rowling managed to avoid that, but I'm still not putting them in my stories. In my mind, defeating Voldemort is only half the challenge: his army isn't going to just go away. In this story, that'll be thousands of Death Eaters, and hundreds of Dark creatures he brings to his side. While Harry is the only one who can ice the Dark Lord, he needs help to deal with everybody else. Indeed, my vision for the series is something more closely resembling Lord of the Rings than a Horacrux hunt.

2. I really don't care all that much about Dumbledore's personal history, and neither does GM Harry. He's more than willing to look past old mistakes and certainly possesses a similar cynical view of humanity to his real-life creator, me. Harry's naivety in DH was painful

at times. Aberforth exists. Kendra and Ariana will never be referred to by name.

3. Along with no Horacruxes, there will be none of their cousins, the Deathly Hallows. Harry's invisibility cloak is rare, but not one-of-a-kind. Now, there may be magical powerful items or places that play a role in the story, hell, even something like the Elder Wand, although I don't know at this point.

4. Snape was friends with Lily? WHAT?!

Seriously, if there was any part of DH that left me scratching my head, it was this. Suffice to say that Snape was a distant admirer of Harry's mother (and as already shown, lost his control at least once).

5. If there is one thing that drives me absolutely loony about the books and movies, it is the incompetence of the Dark Eaters. Even the really "good ones." It seems that in all their training and evil-doing over their adult lives, they've failed to learn the fine and challenging art of *ducking*. If I had 5 bucks for every time that a character of seemingly lesser magical skill and experienced zapped a Death Eater with a Stunning Spell or a Body-Binding Curse, I might be as rich as Rowling. It just doesn't make the slightest sense to me. And I enjoyed Molly Weasley finishing off my favorite character, ole' Bella, as much as anyone, but in the end, while contemplating what I'd just read, I couldn't buy it. Molly Weasley has never shown the slightest interest in dueling, is as compassionate as Santa Clause or God himself, and she kills Bellatrix Lestrange, one of Voldemort's most trusted lieutenants. That. Isn't. Right.

And oh my God, *Flying* Death Eaters? Voldemort I can buy, but Crabbe and Goyle Senior are never going to generate enough lift to get off the ground, no matter how much magic they use. That was CG taken too far.

Stunners and Body-Bind Curses might have their uses. But if that's all you are taking into battle against *adult* wizards, that and a head full of idealism, the best thing you can wish for is to be sent home in a body bag. How does anyone *fear* guys that can be overpowered by a guy (Neville) that can barely manage the most basic of offensive spells? If

defensive spells exist, then why is Hermione the only one that can use them?

Making things even more infuriating was that, both in the book and movie, when the Order shows up, suddenly Lucius Malfoy is capable of, say, reflecting a hostile spell. That kind of high-intensity fighting is what I have in mind.

I loved the 5th book, and the movie was a pretty good adaptation. Maybe I'm obsessing a bit, and I realize that Harry wasn't exactly as advanced or dedicated as mine is, and it wouldn't be any fun if Neville and Ginny got killed in the 5th book, or were completely helpless. It's always fun to see David beating Goliath. But that doesn't make it any less absurd. So I'm going to do things differently.

6. Kudos to Rowling for having Voldemort decapitate and then take over the Ministry. Poor Rufus got a raw deal. I don't see him as nearly that bad. Of course Rowling's Harry hates politics, so his view of Scrimgeour is going to be a wee bit skewed, but I thought going to the Burrow and demanding to know why Dumbledore wrote them into the will was a bit much. In my mind, Scrimgeour is a determined, hard-nosed Light wizard committed to the defeat of Voldemort and the triumph of the Light over the Dark. He hates Dark magic, and those that practice it. But he's more Mad-Eye Moody than he is Cornelius Fudge.

7. HURRAY! GOBLINS! Goblins have remained neutral in almost every wizarding war to date, including the one against Grindelwald. But as Rowling showed, they've got a lot to lose from a wizarding world ruled by a Voldemort. That said, getting them to actually fight side-by-side by wizards...that'll take a little convincing.

8. Everybody lives happily ever after.

Look, I understand that Harry Potter is supposed to appeal to people of all ages, especially children that getting interested in reading because they love the series. That's wonderful, and evidence of Rowling's genius.

But the Epilogue was too fairy-tale like for my liking. Sure, she killed Remus and Tonks. She killed Mad-Eye. She killed poor little Dobby

(love that scene with Harry digging the grave). She killed Fred (thus matching approximately 80 of fanfiction stories involving a violent final battle, where one of the Weasley twins dies.) She killed Crabbe for some reason, presumably to make Draco 's bipolar personality swing back to "good." She even killed Harry...sort of. But in the end, Harry ends up with Ginny, Hermione ends up with Ron (ugh). Hell, even *Draco* lives, marries somebody (probably Pansy), and has a kid (what the hell kind of a name is *Scorpius*, anyway?) Her efforts to redeem Draco were a bit confusing. As was the need for him to be redeemed. Anyway, don't expect a happy ending. War is brutal. War is random in who it claims. War can destroy families in a single, terrible instant. And War is ugly. Those that put themselves on the front lines often pay the price for it. And Harry, Hermione, Ginny, and everyone else is going to be right in the thick of things.

The Second Wizarding War, as it will be depicted in the Grey Maiden Series, is not Harry and friends vs. Voldemort and frightened or crazy goons. It's Light and "anti-Voldemort" Dark vs. "evil" Dark. And "evil" Dark is one hell of a threat, because unlike its opponents, it is united. Voldemort still possesses the charisma of Tom Riddle, in addition to his brutality. Voldemort is even stronger this time around, because he can build on what he left behind. He promises a restoration of the Middle Ages, where Purebloods ruled over all. He promises territory, wealth, slave labor...that's quite an enticing deal to a lot of these old families, especially the pockets of Dark wizards in Eastern Europe.

Please, *please* understand that I have the utmost respect and admiration for JKR. I certainly couldn't have done it better, because after all, I'm using *her* characters and *her* world. But I'd be lying if I said that I thought she always did things the right way.

Chapter 17: A Serpent's Wrath

As it turned out, another three days passed before Hermione was finally released from the Hospital Wing. And even then, Madam Pomfrey seemed rather reluctant to let her go. The reasons for her misgivings quickly became apparent. Hermione tired easily, and would sometimes suffer from headaches that forced her to sit down. The symptoms had improved as the week wore on, and she was able to write her parents a kind, if not entirely honest letter explaining her continued presence at Hogwarts.

Though Ginny was due back tomorrow, Hermione was eager to start working immediately on the Egg Clue, as well as some final research on old pureblood laws. The information she found helped build his case, but she was unable to uncover any precedents for duels involving offenses to Muggleborns. Harry had known there was a chance this wouldn't work. In that case, he would need to figure out another way to neutralize his Slytherin rival and protect his friends. He hoped that wouldn't be necessary.

There was a muffled thump as Hermione closed the large book in her lap. Harry glanced up from what he'd been reading and looked over at her.

"You'd mentioned that Loon..." Hermione stopped, looking horrified. "Loony" was Luna's nickname around Hogwarts, used by people that Hermione didn't want to associate with. "...Luna Lovegood," she corrected, both her cheeks still tinged with red, "...had given you a hint about the Egg Clue?"

"Yes, she did, during the Yule Ball," Harry replied. "A little self-conscious there?"

"Shut up," she snapped at him. "I don't...she *is* a bit odd, Harry, but she can't possibly be as bad as everyone says. Of course, you know her better than I do, and I just assumed..."

"She's *different*, Hermione. She sees the world differently than we do, for reasons that even she doesn't entirely understand. And she's *gifted*."

"You aren't talking about all that nonsense with the Snunkle-Horned Chorkaks, are you?" Hermione asked.

"Crumple-Horned Snorkaks," Harry corrected. "And no, I'm not. I get the sense that she's perfectly aware that everything she says about all those imaginary creatures *is* complete nonsense. It's the other things she says. The things you don't hear unless you've trained yourself to ignore the gibberish."

"Then why does she bother with it?" Hermione asked. "If she's as...gifted as you say, why bother pretending to be some sort of ill-informed conspiracy theorist?"

Harry grimaced. "Look, I don't consider myself an expert on Luna, but I've probably gotten to know her better than anyone else here. I *think* that after her mother died, her father was quite lonely. I think that he *does* believe in Nargles, and Crumple-Horned Snorkaks, and all of those inane conspiracy theories."

"Well I *hope* that's the case, given the rubbish he puts in his newspaper," Hermione interjected. "Have you ever read the *Quibbler*? It's the most illogical, imaginative, and paranoid publication that I've ever read."

"*You*'ve read it?"

Hermione sounded defensive. "Well...I just wanted to know more about it."

"That's Hermione-speak for 'I'll read anything if it stands still long enough,'" Harry observed dryly.

Hermione threw him a half-hearted glare.

Harry fidgeted, turning his wand over in his fingers. "Luna said that water was the answer."

"Pardon?"

"Water is the answer," Harry repeated. "I don't know what to make of that. It certainly isn't the sound of water."

“Something in the water, maybe?” Hermione suggested.

Harry shrugged. “I’m honestly not sure if I’m making this up, but I didn’t get the sense that the *question* concerned the clue itself.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Why is she telling you that water is the answer to something if it has nothing to do with the problem she knows you are trying to solve?” Hermione frowned. “I don’t think she’s one to be deceitful. She wouldn’t give you a hint to lead you in the wrong directions...would she?”

Harry sat forward, exasperated. “I don’t know,” he said. “Sometimes, I don’t know what Luna wants, or expects. I often don’t understand what she’s trying to accomplish. She sent me a letter once that I spent hours trying to decode, but when I asked her about it, she seemed surprised that I was even bothering to search it for meaning.” He sighed. “Maybe it’s best we just try to work this out on our own.”

“Perhaps,” Hermione said. “We could also run it by Ginny, see if she can make any sense of it.” She repeated Luna’s hint, carefully pronouncing every syllable, as if she hoped to pull information from the words themselves. “The Task must have something to do with water.”

“A fat lot of good that does us,” Harry groaned. He was getting more and more frustrated by his inability to understand the Egg Clue. He still had plenty of time, but he recognized that the champions wouldn’t have been given any sort of clue unless the task required significant and specialized preparation.

“Think positive,” Hermione urged.

“I’m trying,” he replied, talking into his hands. “I just have the feeling that we’re missing something. Something that two people as bright as we are shouldn’t be missing. This can’t be as hard as it seems, Hermione.”

She didn’t immediately respond. “Maybe we ought to just wait for Ginny to get back...you know, the Task might take place in the Lake.”

Harry considered that. "Sounds reasonable. The problem is that we're extrapolating that from Luna's advice, not from the egg itself. We might be right, but there's also a possibility that we're wrong, and I won't be prepared when the Task turns out to have nothing to do with the Lake." He got up. "Regardless, I'm done with this. It's time for dinner, anyway. Ginny'll be back tomorrow."

"You're putting a lot of faith in her," Hermione pointed out.

"I didn't mean to suggest anything."

"I'm not saying you did."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

Hermione closed the book on her lap, this time with considerably more force. Harry could feel the impact in his chest. "You know what? You're right. I've had enough of this nonsense for one day."

That night, Harry *dreamed*.

He seemed to glide inches above an aged wooden floor, moving through a darkened hallway lit only by a light emanated from behind a half-open door. The light was also the only evidence the manor had been inhabited for some time. The walls were covered by a thin film of dust, obscuring a pair of very old paintings, each depicting a long-deceased member of the family that had once claimed the spacious home as its own. But the subjects were unmoving, staring blankly into a single, fixed point. This was a Muggle home.

He seemed to slither down the hallway, slipping through the half-open door without moving it an inch. Inside, the source of light was revealed to be a soft glow produced by a roaring fire. A large red armchair dominated the room, facing the fire, its occupant hidden by the high back.

Two other figures were visible as his perspective became fixed and stable. One, short and rotund, with thinning hair and a perpetually terrified expression. The other, a short, slender woman, her dark hair falling well past her shoulders, her eyes cold and cruel.

A serpentine hiss broke the silence. Another series of hissing came from the chair in response. Then, a raspy, high voice spoke. "Nagini reports that more Muggles have been moving about the property...children, mostly. It seems that we attracted more attention than I had intended with the death of that old Muggle."

"Would you like me to deal with the trespassers, my Lord?" the woman asked.

"No. More bodies would only attract more attention. As far as any one in the town knows, this place has been deserted for decades. No need to discourage those assumptions. The wards should keep them away anyway...correct, Wormtail?" There was a blatant threat in that query.

"I believe so, Master," the short man replied, his voice shaking.

"You'd best be right," the raspy voice said. "For my gratitude for finding me in the forest may not spare you my wrath. There must be no mistakes."

"Of course, Master," the frightened man replied.

"Our plans proceed?" The tone of the raspy voice indicated that the speaker already knew the answer.

"Yes," was the woman's reply. "Our man in Hogwarts has escaped detection, even suspicion. He is playing his part brilliantly. As for the rest...he survived the First Task."

"As I expected," the raspy voice replied. "He is strong, stronger than I had anticipated. No matter. He is raw, undisciplined, unrefined...he will not prove to be a challenge."

"Of course not, my Lord," the man replied, perhaps trying to win back his vindictive master's favor.

"Be silent, Wormtail," he hissed. "I have heard enough of your groveling and sniveling." The voice quieted for a moment, then... "Ah...he is here?"

“Who, my Lord?” the woman replied, her eyes scanning the room.

“We have a guest, my dear Alecko. Harry Potter.”

A piercing pain sliced through the fog of the dream, and the scene fell in and out of focus. The pain faded, and the unseen Dark Lord laughed softly. “Yes, he is indeed watching...and listening.”

The short, balding man was now looking around, a film of sweat glistening on his skin, as if expecting to see him standing somewhere in the room. Another cold laugh.”

“He is not physically present, you fool. His body remains safe at Hogwarts...but his mind...his mind has been drawn to this moment. You see, I intend to put on a bit of a demonstration...Wormtail, fetch the prisoner.”

The man looked surprised. “My Lord, I thought-”

“I will not ask again.”

“Yes, my Lord,” the man said. He apologized, then ran frantically toward a door to the right of Harry’s vantage point, disappearing into a darkened corridor. “I want you to see something, Harry. I want you to understand...”

The woman picked at her nails as they waited. Then, the short man returned, carrying a body of a middle-aged woman, wearing nightclothes, indicating she had probably been snatched from her bed. Wormtail set her down on the floor in front of the armchair, then made a frightful retreat, biting at his fingernails as he watched the scene before him unfold.

Harry moved along the floor, so that he was now slightly behind and to the left of the armchair. He saw a small, red-scaled limb resting on the armrest.

“Bertha Jorkins,” the raspy voice said. “She works at the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Her capture was an accident, made necessary after Wormtail allowed himself to be recognized.

The short man backed up a few more steps, shaking violently. He'd nearly bitten his fingernails down to the roots.

"She held information that I needed. I took it. She was..damaged. Yet she still has her uses."

The woman lying unconscious was plump and not particularly attractive. Her dark brown hair was tangled and knotted, her features blackened by smears of earth. Her breathing was shallow, but steady. "I should wake her up for this, should I not, Harry? Crucio."

The woman's eyes flew open, and she began to writhe and roll, her mouth open in full scream. Her shrieks of agony pierced the haze of pain he was experiencing, as if the curse had affected them both. Finally, the figure on the armchair lowered his wand, and the woman's screams stopped. She rolled over, and screamed again when she caught sight of her tormentor. Her cry was silenced as the Dark Lord again raised his wand. "PetrificusCorpus," he whispered.

Bertha's joints locked up, and her body was frozen in position. Her eyes, wide with fear, continued to desperately search her surroundings, like those of a caged animal trying to escape.

"Disappointing," the raspy voice sighed. "Two spells, and I am already feeling the weakening of my magic. A temporary problem only, but an inconvenience nonetheless...no matter. Nagini hasn't been fed in some time." The last words were spoken in English, but contained the underlying hiss of Parseltongue. The scaled arm raised itself off the armrest, and a tiny, bone-like finger pointed directly at the immobile body before him.

Harry realized whose eyes he was seeing out of when he moved closer, reared back, and struck, two long, slender fangs puncturing the hopeless witch's chest. Nagini struck again...and again. But no blood flowed from the wounds. Bertha's eyes glazed over, as the venom began to course through her bloodstream.

"Finite," the raspy voice said.

The body of Bertha Jorkins flew into spasms and convulsions, even as blood welled up through the half-dozen wounds in her torso. It

spread across the floor, slowly pooling at the feet of the armchair. A forked tongue tasted the air.

“Remember what you have seen, Harry Potter. Remember that I am the Master of Death itself.” A high, cold laugh followed this declaration.

The scene faded away as the most intense and brutal agony he’d felt thus far assaulted him, tearing him away...

Harry Potter shot bolt upright, the last echoes of Lord Voldemort’s parting laugh ringing in his ears. His scar burned fiercely, and he closed his eyes, clenched his teeth, tried with every fiber of his being to suppress a scream.

Slowly, the pain faded. He struggled to disentangle himself from sweat-drenched sheets. He felt an unnatural cold penetrate his very being, and he shivered violently.

Then he noticed that the curtains to his four-poster bed were open. And he noticed the black face that loomed out from the Darkness. It spoke. “Potter?”

The voice was familiar. “Blaise,” he gasped out. “What-”

“You alright? Must have been one hell of a nightmare.”

“How-”

“You were moaning in your sleep,” Blaise explained. I hadn’t noticed that before, so I went over to see what was going on. I unlocked your curtains...pretty advanced security spell, by the way...and found you like this...”

Harry was breathing hard, and he could feel the sweat drying on his skin. His stomach revolted, but he forced it down, taking deep gulps of precious air. A part of him was angry at Blaise for violating his privacy, another part was grateful that one of his classmates actually cared enough to see if he was alright. At the moment, both parts were being routed by the one that kept playing ghostly images of his dream over and over again.

Blaise moved closer, sitting on the edge of the bed, scrutinizing his forehead. He looked genuinely concerned. "Potter, your scar's bleeding."

Confused, Harry lifted a trembling hand and brushed it across his forehead. He felt something wet and sticky. When he brought it down and examined his fingertips, they glistened in the faint light. His eyes were adjusted now, and he continued to stare in amazement and fear at his hand. "Hasn't done that in a while," he breathed.

The last time it had, during his first year, he and Hermione had nearly died while tracking down a wounded unicorn. Harry had needed to be carried to the Hospital Wing by Hagrid, unconscious and barely clinging to life.

"Should I take you to the Hospital Wing, Potter?" Blaise asked. The worry in his voice was real.

"Anyone else hear?" Harry asked anxiously, still looking at his bloody fingers.

"Just one other," Blaise said. "You're lucky most of the boys in this room sleep like rocks."

"Who?"

"Nott's awake, I think. Hasn't come out yet, but I saw a light inside his curtains," Blaise whispered. "Forget embarrassing yourself, Potter, you look awful."

"Thanks," Harry replied sarcastically. It came okay as a gasp of air. "I'll be okay. He tried to wipe his forehead with the sleeve of his robe. It came away damp with blood. Harry twisted his legs out of the sweat-soaked sheets. His stomach revolted again. This time, he scrambled out of bed, nearly knocking over Blaise, and stumbled into the bathroom, barely reaching the toilet in time. He retched, once, twice, three times, and then fell back on his legs, panting. He wiped the sick from his lips with the other sleeve. The bathroom was slightly lit, and he could now see the bloodstains on his robes.

He heard Blaise behind him. The situation was eerily familiar, except that time, the nightmare had been just that, and the observer had been the trustworthy house-elf Dobby, not one of his peers. "Blaise, I'll be *fine*."

"Right," he said, although he sounded incredulous, and didn't move an inch. "Are you sure you don't want-"

"No," Harry bit out. "Just give me a minute. Never mention this to anyone, alright? Go back to sleep."

"Potter, with all due respect for your privacy, *that* was no ordinary nightmare," Blaise said. "I've never seen anything like that. And your scar..."

"Maybe I just have really bad memories," Harry suggested, trying to drive the other Slytherin away. "I've certainly got plenty of material."

"You said your scar hadn't bled like that in some time."

"It doesn't *concern* you. I appreciate that you care, Blaise, but I'm *fine*." Harry turned around and fixed him with bloodshot, but determined, eyes.

"Very well. But I'm going to make sure you talk to *somebody* about this, even if I have to tell Granger what happened." When Harry began to object, he held up a hand. "Nobody else, Potter. But that whole thing was really weird and just a little scary, if you don't mind me saying."

"Alright, I'll talk to someone about it. Are you happy? Can I go back to bed? Or are you going to interrogate me some more?" Harry demanded.

Blaise nodded, and left the bathroom. Harry flushed the toilet, got up, and walked over to the mirror. He stared at himself. He lifted his sweat-and-blood-covered bangs, and saw that his scar had scabbed over. Daphne wasn't going to like this, or any of the details of what he had seen.

Or, indeed, the way in which he had witnessed it.

Shaking his head, he staggered back to his bed, shut the curtains, and dug his wand out from beneath his pillow to cast a pair of new security spells on it, as well as a Silencing Charm. He could have kicked himself for overlooking the latter. The last thing he needed was to appear weak before his fellow Slytherins, even if it was only Blaise. Nott probably knew what was happening to."

Harry lay down, and almost instantly fell into an exhausted sleep. His last thought was that he and Ginny would be back together again the next morning. The week had seemed like an eternity. Her gentle, delicate features helped to soothe him back into the abyss.

It was no more than twenty seconds after he'd greeted Ginny with a quick peck on the lips that he saw Blaise Zabini giving him a meaningful look over her shoulder. It was no more than five minutes later than he was explaining what had happened the previous night to Ginny and Hermione. It was no more than forty-five minutes later that all three of them were seated in the office of Albus Dumbledore. Also present were Professors McGonagall and Snape.

Dumbledore looked at Harry over his half-moon spectacles, and asked him to describe, in as much detail as possible, what he had seen that last night. Dumbledore was not betraying much concern, although Harry knew that on the inside, things were probably much different. He described the setting, although he hadn't seen enough to really know where Voldemort was. Now that he was awake, he recognized the Death Eaters as Alecto Carrow and Peter Pettigrew.

The murder of Bertha Jorkins was the hardest to describe. He managed to get out the gruesome details, including Voldemort's use of a Body Freezing spell to prolong the witch's agony, and his use of Nagini to finally finish her off. McGonagall was white by the time he was finished. Ginny's hand was so tightly clutching his that it was in danger of cutting off circulation, and Hermione was brushing tears from her eyes. Snape, for his part, looked even more dour.

Dumbledore looked contemplative. "This is indeed concerning, Harry," he finally said. "Severus, you had said Mr. Potter was making good progress in his Occlumency?"

"Yes," Snape said, looking at Harry as he spoke. "Potter showed surprising aptitude and self-control. By no means has he mastered the art, but I felt he was proficient enough to keep out the Dark Lord in his weakened state. I intended to do further work in the coming weeks."

Harry nodded a silent agreement, and Snape looked satisfied. When Harry treated him with respect, he was easily able to get along with his head of House. When he didn't, he began to remind the Potions Master of James Potter, which was never a good thing.

At that moment, the large doors to Dumbledore's sanctum swing open, and an angry, disheveled, and exhausted Daphne Dressler strode through them. Her robes were dirty and torn, and dark patches under her eyes testified to the fact that she hadn't slept recently. Dried blood still marked a small cut below her right ear. Her eyes searched out Dumbledore. "You *ought* to have learned by now," she began, moving in front of the three students, "that you don't interrogate Harry, about *anything*, without my tacit permission or my actual presence."

"*Daphne*," McGonagall whispered, shocked by her former student's behavior. His guardian didn't even look at her.

"I meant no offense, Daphne," Dumbledore responded, hands open in a gesture of peace. "I had not expected your return for several days, and once Mr. Potter bring this issue to my attention, I felt it best that I learn as much as I could as quickly as I could."

Daphne's glare suggested she didn't quite believe him on that, but she backed down. A wave of her wand produced a chair next to Hermione's, and she sat down, eyes still locked on Hogwarts' headmaster. "So, what's going on?"

Harry explained again, this time in less graphic detail. His recollections were unpleasant at best, frightening at worst. Daphne's eyes betrayed little fear, but her features tightened. "So despite Snape's Occlumency training, Voldemort was able to pierce your defenses."

"Was that an attack on my teaching abilities, Dressler?" Snape growled. "After all, I only took on the responsibility because you were too frightened to cause your precious ward any further anguish."

"That's right," Daphne snapped back. Knowing what he now knew, Daphne's blatant hatred of Severus Snape now made a great deal more sense. "It takes a certain degree of callous and heartlessness to dig out a child's most painful memories in the name of *education*."

"Are you *suggesting*-"

"*Enough*," Dumbledore said, his voice carrying the same magical authority that he often used to quiet the Great Hall. The bickering pair stared at him, as if they were children waiting for the judgment of a parent. "This is not about either of *you*," he said. "This is about Harry, and about Lord Voldemort. Please, for the sake of him, put your past grudges aside."

Daphne fixed Snape with a death glare, but nodded. Snape barely acknowledged the Headmaster. "Both of you care for Harry, in different ways. Regardless," he said, this time looking at Harry, who was starting to wonder if he'd been forgotten. "That Lord Voldemort was able to penetrate Harry's mind with such ease creates serious problems. Severus, is my concern justified?"

"Absolutely not," Snape said. "The Dark Lord is the most skilled Legilimens I have ever encountered. His abilities can extend far beyond his line of sight. Although I've never known him to pull information from great distances."

"It's unheard of," Daphne interjected. "Voldemort is one of the most powerful and skilled Dark wizards in history, but even his power has limits. How can he affect Harry, in his weakened state, from such great distances?"

Harry had been turning that very question over and over again in his mind from the moment he'd awakened. Clearly, there was something unusual about his relationship with Voldemort. They had some kind of connection that no one seemed to understand.

“Harry,” Dumbledore said, addressing him directly this time. “You said that not only did your scar burn, but it actually bled this time.”

“Yes,” Harry said. “My scar has always been...a sort of proximity alarm of sorts, for Voldemort. It burns when he draws close. It burns more fiercely when he becomes angry.” In his peripheral vision, he saw Hermione give him a frightened look. Ginny’s hand, which had relaxed a bit, squeezed his even harder, although she remained silent, her attention focused on the Headmaster.

Dumbledore considered Harry’s words, but Daphne broke the silence. “There has to be some sort of connection,” she reasoned. “Obviously, one related to his scar. There’s also the matter of his ability to speak Parseltongue. That’s certainly not inherited – his family doesn’t have a single recorded Parselmouth on record.” McGonagall gasped a bit at this latest revelation; she obviously hadn’t known about it before hand.

Dumbledore remained silent, his forehead furrowed in thought. Then, without explanation, he reached behind him and took the Sorting Hat in his hand. He gently placed it on his head, and his eyes disappeared beneath the brim. Snape and Daphne frowned in confusion, but they stayed silent, waiting for Dumbledore to speak. Finally, he nodded, removed the Sorting Hat, placing it gently on the table behind his desk. “As you are aware, or should be, the Sorting Hat is not merely an artifact used to determine House placement. It is one of the oldest and most powerful magical relics known to Wizardkind, created by the combined magic of all four founders, two of whom were quite skilled at Legilimency.”

“Rowena Ravenclaw and Salazar Slytherin,” Hermione whispered in explanation.

“Correct, Miss Granger,” Dumbledore said, having clearly heard her. Hermione’s cheeks reddened slightly, although Harry couldn’t tell if she was embarrassed for being caught speaking out of turn or because she had been complimented by Dumbledore. It was probably a combination of both, he decided.

"The Sorting Hat merely confirmed a number of my suspicions," Dumbledore continued. "First, it recalled that when it was sorting you, Harry, it felt a foreign and yet quite familiar presence in your mind."

"Tom Riddle," Harry said.

"Correct," Dumbledore said. "It recognized that you were a Parselmouth, recognized your potential, and a number of other traits that also characterized a young Tom Riddle. A desire to lead, to prove your worth to others, and to reach the very limits of your magical potential. Though your placement into Slytherin did not take your connection with Tom into account, you were placed there because the Sorting Hat felt you would prosper in Slytherin."

"I can't argue with its choice," Harry admitted. As a Slytherin, he'd had a chance to become involved in pureblood politics that he wouldn't have had as a Gryffindor, like his parents, or a Ravenclaw, like his guardian. Slytherin had given a chance to improve his ability to read body language, to detect subtle motives, and to improve his self-control.

"What I wished to confirm was my suspicion that there is in fact a powerful mental connection between you and Tom, a connection forged on the night that he gave you your scar."

"How does the connection work?" Daphne asked.

"Even I do not completely understand it. Harry is, of course, unique in having survived a Killing Curse as an untrained infant. His curse scar is unlike any that I have ever encountered, either in person or in my extensive research on the subject," Dumbledore said. "Regardless, if Lord Voldemort can send you visions of the kind that you experienced last night, there is certainly a possibility that he could penetrate deeper into your memories."

"Making me a security risk," Harry said, bitterly.

"I can continue your instruction in Occlumency, but I'm unsure if your ability to keep out the Dark Lord will improve," Snape said. "If that is indeed the case, then you just summed up your situation better than any of us could have. There is certain information that may have to

be...withheld from you. If the Dark Lord continues to grow stronger, there is even a chance he may be able to take over your mind."

Harry closed his eyes as fragmented images of his possession by Riddle's shades in his second year flashed through his mind. The Basilisk...Daphne, enraged...Hermione, slumping lifelessly to the ground after being struck by the Mind Death Curse...

"There must be something we can do," McGonagall urged, looking at her despondent student. "We cannot be entirely helpless."

"Maybe...we're not?"

Harry's eyes opened, and joined the eyes of everyone else in the room in staring at Hermione, who looked shocked by her own daring.

"Elaborate," Daphne said. It sounded like an order.

"Well...was Voldemort really *inside* Harry's mind last night, or was the opposite true? Perhaps he can draw Harry's consciousness into his own mind, but given enough training, at least at long distances, Harry can keep him from penetrating any further?"

Snape looked ready to dismiss the suggestion, but Dumbledore spoke first, a hint of hope shining in his blue eyes. "As always, Miss Granger, your astuteness is simply remarkable for a witch of your age."

This time Hermione went bright red, ducking her head slightly.

"Do you think she could actually be right?" Daphne asked. There was a disturbing desperation in her voice.

Dumbledore nodded. "It seems that by assuming the worst, we may have overlooked the limits of the connection. I believe that Miss Granger may have a very valid point. The connection is like a bridge, a constant connection between Harry and Lord Voldemort. But to continue the analogy, I see no reason why Harry could not construct a roadblock, to prevent Voldemort from seeing into his mind at a distance, or controlling him from afar. I suggest that Professor Snape continue to instruct you in Occlumency, with a focus on protecting

your memories, not keeping a foreign mind out altogether. That may be impossible in this case.”

“What about at short range?” Ginny asked, her voice squeaky.

Snape’s expression was deadly serious. “At that range,” he said softly, “the Dark Lord could penetrate the mind of any individual. The scar, except for the pain it may cause Potter, will have little effect on his ability to repel a mental assault.”

“But it is possible to prevent Harry from coming into such close contact with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, is it not?” McGonagall asked. “If the connection can be rendered harmless from a distance...”

“It would not be *harmless*, even if Granger turns out to be correct,” Snape corrected. “The Dark Lord could still draw Potter out, show him what he wanted him to see. That, in all likelihood, cannot be avoided.”

“I can deal with nightmares,” Harry replied confidently.

Snape’s gaze was discomfiting. “Can you, Mr. Potter, when the dreams are not dreams, but *reality*? The Dark Lord often enjoyed tormenting his enemies before he killed them, driving them mad until they were literally begging for death. I would not approach this with such a cavalier attitude.”

Ginny’s hand was a vise-grip now, but he barely even felt the pain. He knew Snape was right. He knew that he was in for a rough go of things.

“Does anyone else know anything about this connection?” Daphne asked him. “Or even have the slightest reason to suspect anything unusual?”

Harry winced. “Blaise Zabini probably suspects something.”

“As the Slytherins in your dormitory go, Mr. Zabini is mostly harmless,” Snape said.

“Well, we’re not exactly friends...but we’re on relatively good terms. I think I can trust him...to an extent.”

Daphne nodded, content with his answer. “I believe we’ve gained all the information we can from him,” she said.

“Perhaps,” Dumbledore replied. “I merely ask, Harry, that you report any further dreams or visions that you believe may have been sent by Lord Voldemort. Tom is a brilliant man, but it is quite possible that he, or one of his minions, may reveal more about his plans than he intends.”

“Albus, you’re treating him like a source of information!” McGonagall explained. “*He’s just a boy!*”

“I can handle it, Professor, though I appreciate your concern. I know what I have to do.”

From McGonagall’s slightly horrified look, she believed him...and probably wished she didn’t. He felt Daphne’s hand on his shoulder, and felt Ginny’s hand fall away from his. That puzzled him, although he didn’t think much of it.

“Then our meeting is concluded,” Daphne declared.

“You will meet me Wednesday night for Occlumency lessons,” Snape told him, then left, his cape flapping behind him. Harry rose, as did Ginny and Hermione. Both looked rather uncomfortable, but for different reasons. Ginny’s gaze kept skipping from Daphne to the floor, and back again.

Once they were outside, he spoke quietly to his guardian. “I’d best go to lunch with the others. Why don’t you get yourself cleaned up, and we can talk this afternoon? Meet me at the Fifth Floor landing, and we’ll find someplace private.”

Daphne nodded her agreement. She gently brushed aside his bangs, and stared for a moment at his scabbed-over scar. Then she removed her hand, and the bangs fell to conceal his unique mark once again. She walked away, and Ginny and Hermione came over to him, their eyes full of questions. Harry could give them no answers.

After lunch, Harry attended Transfiguration with Hermione. McGonagall seemed strangely unfocused, and kept looking his way. When class ended, he managed to escape her efforts to talk to him alone. He'd need to clear the air between them, but not today.

He found Daphne waiting exactly where he'd asked her to be, looking refreshed and restored. She had probably returned to the home she was renting in Hogsmeade, washed, rested, changed into fresh dark-blue robes, and even shortened her hair. It struck Harry at that moment how beautiful she might be if not for the pair of scars that marred her face and neck. He led her over to the entrance to the Room of Requirement, then silently walked past it and back three times, focusing on a single thought: *I need a place to sit and talk.*"

Finally, the texture of the door pushed out of the blank castle wall. Daphne didn't so much as blink. She wore a sad smile. "I suppose it was only a matter of time before you found this place." Harry realized he'd never actually mentioned where he had been training. "James practically claimed it as his own, scarcely ever let Lily or I in here before they started dating."

"Wonderful. My primary training arena used to also be my parents' make-out spot."

Daphne snorted, a genuine smile lighting her face. "I suppose that *is* accurate. James would definitely be amused by the irony..." Her smile fell.

Harry pushed open the door, revealing a small space occupied by a large blue couch and an empty fireplace. A glass coffee table was placed in between, with a kettle and two teacups.

They each took a seat, about a third of a meters' space between them. Daphne poured them each a cup, but didn't move them from the saucer. She sat back, looking at him. For a moment, neither of them spoke. "How did your trip go?" Harry asked.

"As well is to be expected," Daphne admitted. "I was able to stay mostly out of sight, and gathered a little intelligence, but much of it

was in the form of rumors and odd stories, told by wizards and Muggles alike.”

“You get into a fight?”

“One wizard didn’t seem to understand my message to stay away from me. I got into a bit of a scuffle. He’ll be fine in a week or so,” she assured him.

Harry winced. That probably meant a broken bone...or three. “What did you find out?”

“There have been strange sightings in the Dark Forests,” Daphne said. “Suspicious animal activity, even rumors of vampire and werewolf sightings.”

“But werewolves are-”

“I know,” she said. “But the people there tend to cast out those afflicted by Lycanthropy, force them to live alone in the woods. Remus would not be welcomed there.”

“Right.”

Daphne paused for a moment, then reached over and took a sip of her tea, before setting it back down.

“Are you worried?” she asked.

“About the scar, and my connection?”

She nodded.

“Yes, I suppose...it’s not a comforting thought, and the vision last night...” he shook his head. “His cruelty, his love of inflicting pain...”

“It’s horrifying,” she said. “And it’s a trait shared by many of his Death Eaters. He tends to attract just about every magical psychopath that lives to his side, turns them into murderous, heartless killers. Bellatrix Lestrange is one of them. Antonin Dolohov is another. They feel no

remorse, no regret for committing even the most brutal and senseless of violent acts. They are monsters, just as he is a monster.”

“Just as Rosier was.”

“Yes,” she replied. “He might have been the worst of the lot. Bellatrix, for all her *creativity*, has a strong preference for the Cruciatus Curse. Dolohov always intends to murder his victims eventually. Rosier could sustain himself on the agony of others. He tortured and killed as if it was a basic need, like the need to eat, drink, or breathe. He hated killing, because it ended their pain. The world is far better with him gone.”

“But, Edmond...”

“I don’t know which one of them did it,” Daphne interrupted, her voice harsh. “Their orders were to kill both of us, and escape. Even Rosier did not question a direct order from his Master...and friend.”

“Do you think Hermione is right?”

“Harry, I hope to Merlin that she is. I can’t bear the thought of what happened to you in the Chamber...what I did to you...happening again.”

“I forgave you for that, you know,” Harry reminded her. “You weren’t of stable mind. You weren’t thinking straight.”

“I still allowed it to happen, made a conscious choice not to fight it, and for that, I can *never* forgive myself.”

Harry fell silent again. This conversation was bringing up memories that neither one of them wanted to contemplate. “I think I’ve found a way to force Draco into a duel.”

“Good,” Daphne said. “What will your argument consist of?”

Harry explained the details of what Hermione had found.

Daphne contemplated them for a moment. “It’s sufficient. I’ll be there to argue your case at any rate. And I have leverage over Lucius.”

Harry knew she was referring to the Vow of Vengeance she had sworn while he lay unconscious in the Hospital Wing. Blaming Lucius, correctly in Harry's mind, for the Diary coming into her ward's possession, she swore that if Lucius ever caused Harry deliberate harm again, then she would afflict Draco in kind. It was the kind of action by his guardian with which he was extremely uncomfortable. "I'd want to stage the duel in front of the school. I want Draco's humiliation to be public."

"Are you sure you aren't underestimating him?" Daphne asked. "I have no doubt that Draco has received significant training in dueling and combat spells from numerous private tutors. Lucius would want Draco, as his heir, to one day be able to match him in power and ability."

"I've considered that," Harry said. "He'll be no pushover, but he has a number of weaknesses I can use against him. He's overconfident when things go right, and easily frustrated when they go wrong. If he's unable to reel in his emotions, he'll be vulnerable."

"Any conditions?"

"No Unforgivable Curses. And nothing that has a significant likelihood of resulting in death. Not for this kind of duel."

"That might make Dumbledore better able to stomach it, at least. He'll fight you on this, Harry."

"I know. But I've made my decision. And I have the law on my side."

"Law he undoubtedly does not recognize, but the Ministry does, and that's what matters," Daphne concluded.

"Yes," Harry said. He looked away from her.

"I'm proud of you, Harry."

"What?" He turned to face her, and saw her words echoed in her expression.

"I'm proud of you, because you are taking responsibility for yourself. You are standing up for yourself, and for your friends. And you have carefully considered the consequences of your actions. That represents a kind of maturity that parents prize in their children.

The implications of her statement were as obvious as they were unsurprising. To her, Harry Potter was her flesh-and-blood son, and nothing could change that. "Thank you," he said.

"When do you want the duel to take place?"

"Soon. I want to get this out of the way. I still need to figure out the Egg Clue."

Daphne's prideful look turned to one of concern. "Still stuck on that, are you? Hermione too?"

Harry nodded.

"Perhaps you should look elsewhere for help, then?" she asked. "It seems that you and Hermione are locked in a way of thinking that is bringing you no closer to the answer."

"I'll keep that in mind," Harry said.

Daphne moved closer to him, and he allowed himself to be pulled into her arms. Daphne didn't speak, and neither did he. There was no need for it. He returned her tight embrace, wondering how he could have ever come this far if not for her. What would have become of him if he'd been raised by Lily's sister, as Dumbledore had intended. Would he even be a Slytherin? Would he even be at Hogwarts?

He could not answer those questions, and he didn't really have any desire to, in any case.

"Thursday," Harry said, pulling out of her arms. "I'll challenge him on Thursday. Snape should be present, as should Lucius, I suppose."

"Alright, I'll be there," she promised. "I'm going to be away until then, however. As a representative of the Ministry, I have to actually make

an appearance there once in a while. I'll be teaching some classes on defensive spells and tactics to the new Auror recruits."

"You'll be a fantastic teacher," he assured her. She smiled.

"Hermione and Ginny are probably waiting for you," Daphne said. "You should go and find them."

"You aren't coming?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'll remain here for a little while. I could use some time to think."

Harry rose, and moved toward the door. "Alright, I guess I'll see you on Thursday."

She nodded again, and he opened the door, checked that no one was around, and slipped outside.

Alone now, Daphne stared aimlessly into the empty fireplace, a tempest of emotions racing through her mind.

She felt wetness on her cheek, as a solitary tear dropped from her right eye. She wiped it away, trying to banish her deepest fears with it.

Dumbledore's surprise was etched into his ancient face, his eyes wide with a mix of confusion and even a hint of anger. "Absolutely not, Mr. Potter. Whatever grievances you might have with Mr. Malfoy, no matter how legitimate they may be, will not be settled by a formal duel in this school as long as I am its Headmaster."

Daphne fixed him with a gaze that might have included a tinge of regret. "I'm sorry, Albus, but you don't have the right to interfere. By the terms of the Amendment of 1612 to the Charter of Dueling, Harry is perfectly within his legal rights to challenge Draco to a duel. And because of the nature of the offense, Draco is required to accept."

Harry had scarcely ever seen Dumbledore angry. His face was set and strained. His eyes were piercing and seemed to darken somewhat. "Daphne, that law is ancient and barbaric."

"Nonetheless," Daphne said, holding up a hand, "It was never officially annulled by the Ministry of Magic. As such, it still governs this situation. Harry has challenged; Draco must accept. They will duel to settle the grievance. Harry wishes to set terms that will insure that both of them emerge from the ring alive. But there is nothing that you can do, Dumbledore. If you try to expel Harry..."

That option had never even occurred to him, but given Dumbledore's state of mind, it was a disturbingly *real* possibility.

"...the Pureblood Assembly will have your head on a platter," she finished. "Albus, I'm sorry. I don't mean to usurp your authority, and I've always had the greatest of respect-"

"Yet you *are* usurping his authority," McGonagall bit out, sounding enraged and shocked. "And though you claim to respect him, you are scarcely *showing* it at the moment. I don't *believe* you, Daphne. He's a *child*! They are both *children*!"

"In that, you are quite wrong, Minerva," Daphne said softly. "But that's irrelevant." She spun to face Lucius. The rage in her glare was cold. Her hatred of him surpassed her capacity to express it. "Lucius, do you object?"

"This is highly *irregular*, Dressler," he said in his usually haughty tone. His hand fell on Draco's shoulder. For his part, the younger Slytherin looked composed and determined. If he was frightened, he didn't betray any signs of it. "Morally..."

Daphne scoffed.

"...morally," Lucius continued, "I do not agree with your ward's course of action. But legally, I can find no holes in your argument. Draco does not deny the allegations, not does he regret his decisions that night." Harry hadn't been sure it was possibly for McGonagall and Dumbledore to grow any paler, but they did exactly that as they listened to Lucius Malfoy speak. "They will duel. But I want something in return."

"You are hardly in a position to ask," Daphne told him haughtily.

"But only *you* are in a position to grant it," Lucius countered. "Lift the Vow of Vengeance."

"You have no right-" Daphne began.

"I have not pursued any legal action to this point. The Vow was sworn on questionable grounds to begin with. I have friends, Dressler, friends that would like to see you carted off to Azkaban with the Death Eaters you imprisoned there," Lucius warned.

Daphne thought for a moment, and then nodded. "Very well. I will lift the Vow..." Her eyes bored into the senior Malfoy, as she spoke, and her voice was stiff and hard. She was making it absolutely clear that she was merely being accommodating, and wasn't giving an inch. It also spoke volumes of her confidence in Harry. Harry also got the sense, from the way that she trailed off, that she wasn't quite finished.

"Excellent," Lucius replied. There was little enthusiasm in his voice, and his hatred of the woman standing across from him was barely concealed.

Daphne raised a finger, an awful smile lighting her face. "I will lift the Vow...if Harry emerges as the victor."

Lucius sneered at her, but he had already accepted the agreement, and could not renege on it or insist on re-negotiating it without losing his honor and having his reputation suffer. It was far too high a price to pay. "Done. You agree, Draco?"

"Yes," the younger Malfoy said, his cold eyes locked with Harry's. "I'll fight him. You're going to regret this, Potter."

"We'll see," Harry countered.

He looked back at the others. Dumbledore looked defeated, seemed to have aged a million years in just a few minutes. McGonagall looked heartbroken. Snape looked no more or less sour than he'd been since Harry had issued the challenge.

"Where, when, and what are the conditions?" Lucius asked.

Daphne looked to Harry. This was his choice.

He took a deep breath, calming his mind. That was one of the many things they'd worked on in his most recent, and relatively successful, Occlumency lesson the previous evening.

"Tomorrow, at noon, in the Great Hall. No Unforgivables. No curses used that could be reasonably expected to cause death."

"Well, at least there's *that*," McGonagall said bitterly. Harry could see that her eyes glistening with unshed tears. A slight pang of regret passed through him, but he let it pass.

Draco had stepped forward, almost stumbling, and extended a hand. Harry crossed to him, grasped his rivals hand, and shook it.

"Then it is done."

"The students *had* been wishing for another spectacle," Snape remarked, sounding disinterested. "I'll inform Mr. Filch."

Lucius nodded curtly, then took Draco out.

Dumbledore rose. "Daphne, I would like-"

"No, Albus," she interrupted him. "Not now. Harry needs to prepare, and I intend to help him." She gestured, and Harry followed her out.

He felt the crushing weight of Dumbledore's disappointment the entire way.

When Harry arrived at the Great Hall, clad in the same black battle robes he'd worn during the First Task, flanked by Hermione to his right and Ginny to his left, the chamber was already full of excited students.

The tables had vanished from sight, replaced by a large dueling ring elevated about a meter above the floor. Around the ring, much of the student body of Hogwarts milled about. Wagers and predictions were

made (despite the fact that gambling was very much against the rules).

There had been no formal announcement of the day's event, but word had leaked out anyway, and news of a formal, *legal* duel spread like wildfire. Despite the lack of any kind of seating arrangements, the students had roughly arranged themselves by House. The Gryffindors were the most raucous; obviously, they were thrilled to see a pair of Slytherins they roundly disliked going at it.

The teachers had not been required to attend, indeed McGonagall had probably urged them to stay away, but most of them were there, up at the Head Table, which remained in place. Daphne was also there, sitting alone adjacent to Mad-Eye Moody.

It was Dumbledore's worst nightmare, Harry knew. The duel was going ahead despite his most vehement protests, and the students could probably think of little else more exciting than watching a pair of hated rivals trying to beat the snot out of each other. This was a spectacle; this was blood sport. And as the violence and brutality of Quidditch bore witness, the wizarding world had a strange soft spot for dangerous human competition.

They made their way over to the near entrance of the ring, unfortunately, located just in front of the Gryffindors. He ignored the jeers, the insults, and the taunting. He was focused on only one thing.

Hermione looked like she was about to either faint or burst into a panicked rant. The stress was etched on Ginny's face as well. Once they stopped, he turned to her. "I'll be alright," he told her. "Don't worry about it. One way or the other, I'll be alright."

Ginny nodded, and Harry drew her in close. Hermione stood off to the side, then could stand it no more and sat down on the stairs leading to the near entrance, her head in her hands, berating herself for ever helping Harry make the duel possible. Harry held Ginny in his arms, amazed at how close they'd become in so little time. He'd always cared for her, but now that they were involved, both seemed to take it up a notch. Perhaps the fact that the relationship was now official allowed them to overcome the awkwardness caused by mutual attraction that had been building between them before the ball.

"You know, I'm honestly not sure who I'm supposed to root for."

Ginny jerked, tearing herself out of his embrace, and started digging in her robes for her wand. Her eyes blazed with rage as she stared at her brother. "I'm in half a mind to hex you so bad that Madam Pomfrey won't even recognize you," she bit out. "Go away, Ron."

Harry stared in wonderment of Ron's intense stubbornness and stupidity, as he continued. "It's a tough choice between that git Malfoy and your new *boyfriend*."

"Well then that's just sad," Ginny said. "Your priorities are so screwed up that you've forgotten where your fucking loyalties lie," she cursed at him.

Ron took that like a blow. "Ginny, he's not-"

"He's not *what*? Family? Merlin, Ron, I'm just speechless. You selfish, two-faced, pathetic, over-protective..."

"Whoa, looks like you've got little Ginny all worked up, ickle Ronniekins" George interrupted. Harry stifled a snort.

"Yeah, Ron, you'd best back down, else there might be two duels going on today," Fred advised.

"Besides, Harry's okay," George continued.

"He's a bright lad."

"Knows what'll happen to him if he breaks Ginny's little heart."

"Not you, too," Ginny hissed. "Listen. It was my decision to become involved with Harry. *Mine*. You have absolutely *no say in this*. I love both of you...all three of you," she amended, shooting a death glare at Ron. "But I don't need your help, and I certainly don't *want* it. I'm a *Slytherin*, and I'm proud of it, Ron, so you'd best stop blaming Harry for *corrupting* your little sister, or any other such nonsense...now sod off, all of you, unless you're planning to offer Harry good luck."

"Sounds reasonable enough," George said. "Quite well put, Ginny."

"Yeah, ickle Ginniekins is growing up, right before our very eyes...well then, Good Luck Potter."

"Yeah, may you splatter Malfoy's innards all over the ceiling, so that Filch has to scrape it off with a butter knife," George finished.

Ginny was still staring at Ron. "Well?" she asked.

"I'll go," he said, stomping off. He shot Harry another glare as he did. Harry returned it with the haughty sneer that he knew infuriated Ron so much. As usual, it did the trick.

"Stop provoking him," Hermione yelled over the noise. "You're only making it worse."

"Dumbledore's getting up," Ginny said.

Harry turned. Dumbledore was now standing, and waved his wand in the air, producing a loud *BANG* that silenced the crowd.

"Good morning to all of you. I assume you have all gather to witness the duel that is about to take place. I must now insist that all students leave a minimum space of two meters between themselves and the dueling ring." Dumbledore sighed, the sigh of a man resigned to his fate. "I would like to ask the two contestants to please take their positions in the ring."

Harry gave Ginny a quick peck on the cheek, then ascended the stairs and stood in the small circle at the top. Draco did the same, staring across at him. The distance seemed considerably farther than it really was.

"This duel, called by Mr. Harry James Potter on the grounds that Mr. Draco Abraxas Malfoy committed a grave offense against Miss Hermione Jane Granger on the night of December 25th, using the legal justification given by the 1612 Amendment to the Charter of Dueling. As an orphan, with no living, magical, blood relatives, Mr. Potter has the right to designate who he considers to be part of his extended family, and therefore on whose behalf he can challenge an offender to a duel. In this case, Mr. Potter has claimed Miss Granger

as a sibling in his extended family.” Dumbledore was clearly reading a pre-rehearsed speech at this point.

“The conditions of the duel, as laid down by Mister Potter, witnessed by Mrs. Daphne Artemis O’Connor Dressler, the challengers’ legal guardian, and Mr. Lucius Saljean Malfoy, the offender’s father, are as follows: the use of Unforgivable Curses is strictly prohibited. Also illegal are the use of any curses used primarily with the intent to kill. Violation of these rules is grounds for immediate termination of the duel, with the offender, in this case, the wizard that uses a prohibited spell, disqualified and his opponent automatically named the victor. In any other case, victory will be judged by Disarmament.”

Dumbledore took a deep breath. This time, what he said came from the heart. “I would like to implore each and every one of you to look upon this as a one-time occurrence. This duel was allowed over my expressed protest, and legal action is being taken to amend the Charter as we speak. Duels are not the way to settle arguments. They are a relic of the past, an anachronistic pureblood wizarding tradition that has somehow been allowed to survive to this day.” Harry didn’t need to look at Hermione to know she was gazing at Dumbledore with a look of deepest gratitude and approval.

“Both duelists will now bow, as a sign of respect.” Both of them did, although neither lifted his eyes from the other. As he lifted his head up, a green, transparent energy field descended from the ceiling and surrounded the ring. It was essentially a huge Servos Shield, designed to protect the spectators from stray spells. Harry slowed his breathing, focused on the task at hand. He tuned out the sounds of the excited crowd, tuned out everything but the beating of his own heart.

“Very well. Duelists to the ready,” Dumbledore instructed. Harry flicked his wrist, and his holly and phoenix-feather wand shot into his waiting hand. He dropped into the dueling stance Daphne had taught him. Right foot forward, left back, knees bent, wand held at a slight upward angle, eyes fixed on his target. Malfoy favored a more classic, closed stance, his wand pointed down at the floor.

“Begin.”

At Dumbledore's command, Harry began his assault. "*Percutio! Reducto!*"

The Striking Curse was aimed at Draco's head, and it ricocheted off his hastily conjured shield. The Blasting Curse was aimed at his feet, and though Malfoy avoided getting hitting, the explosion blasted a hole in the floor of the ring and blew Malfoy back, off balance. "*Evanbero! Stupefy! Stupefy! Expelliarmus!*" Harry cast in quick succession.

Malfoy had no choice but to dodge, and he did. The Bludgeoning Curse clipped his leg anyway, spinning him around and leaving a nasty bruise, but the two Stunners and the Disarming Spell shot straight past and hit the jade-green barrier. Harry pressed the attack, hoping to tire Malfoy early, limit the number of spells he could get off. He fired another Striking Curse at Draco's head, then followed that up with a Burning Curse. At such a distance, the latter wasn't even close to hitting, but the blast of light had its intended effect, disorienting Malfoy and forcing him to hold his shield, so that the Striking Curse struck late enough to partially punch through his weakened defenses and knock him backwards into the shield wall. Harry took four strides in his direction while Draco tried to orient himself. He did, and finally got into the battle. A powerful Slicing Curse rebounded off Harry's shield, but the Cutting Curse that followed it got through, nicking Harry's left arm and drawing blood.

Harry winced in pain, and was delayed enough for Draco to cast his next spell. "*Coepio!*"

A bone-crushing Compression Curse lanced toward him, and this time it was he who had to dodge as the Dark curse slammed into the wall behind him. *Alright, cut the cute stuff. Malfoy certainly is.*

A split second before Malfoy blasted three more Slicing Curses, Harry loosed a pair of Stinging Hexes, sandwiched around a Blinding Curse. The first two curses hit each other in mid-flight, exploding in a spectacular and colorful fireball. The Blinding Curse hit Malfoy directly in the forehead, and the Stinging Hex hit his wand arm, causing him to howl in pain and nearly lose his wand just minutes into the battle. It

was the same series of spells he'd used to best Hermione at the dueling club.

The problem was that this time he wasn't able to take advantage of it. Draco had also used an Impediment Jinx without uttering an incantation, and so as soon as Harry had sent the Slicing Curses into the floor, he was knocked back hard, crashing to the floor painfully. He recovered as quickly as he could, but by then Draco had regained his sight and found his feet.

Stalemate. Again.

Draco moved to his right, and Harry countered by moving to his left. Now, the verbal taunting began. "Getting tired, Malfoy? Looks like that opening took a lot out of you."

Harry slapped aside a Disarming Spell.

"You wish, Potter. How's the shoulder?" Malfoy was indeed breathing heavily, but then again, so was Harry.

"Better than you're about to be. *Jacio! Stupefy! Evanbero!*"

Harry had just using three spells that worked in completely different ways, covered different target areas, and require different amounts of skill to block. Malfoy proved incapable of adjusting that fast. The last two spells missed, but only because Malfoy, trying to block all three at once, had already been lifted off his feet by the Flinging Hex and hammered into the shield wall. But again, he'd already silently retaliated.

The Bludgeoning Curse slammed into Harry's midsection, blasting through his partially-formed shield, and hurling him back with tremendous force. He hit the shield wall, bounced off, and slammed into the ground. He heard a horrific CRACK, and his left wrist exploded in agony. Fighting back tears, he somehow got to his feet, and angrily retaliated. He wanted to *hurt* Malfoy now, to make him feel the pain he currently felt. He charged forward, and launched two powerful Slicing Curses and two more Blasting Curses at his recovering opponent, screaming the incantations, allowing his magic to flow into the spells and supercharge them.

Malfoy was nearly decapitated by the first Slicing Curse, but the second missed altogether. The first Blasting curse blew a huge crater in the floor, blowing Malfoy back, and the second nearly blew a hole in the shield wall, sending sparks flying out over the front row of Ravenclaws. There was no whistle, meaning that his first Slicing curse had not disqualified him. He breathed a sigh of relief. He'd have to be more accurate. But Malfoy was still standing, and he was still hurting. He pulled back to fire a pair of Bludgeoning Curses, but Malfoy's Impediment Jinx knocked him off his feet. Malfoy advanced, a triumphant smile lighting his features, raising his wand for the finishing blow.

Harry could have gotten up easily, and deflected it. But at that moment, he took a chance, and decided to exploit Draco's arrogance. He rolled on the ground in pain, and Draco stopped moving forward and laughed.

It was a critical error. Harry rolled over, extended his wand arm out, and hit Malfoy directly in the face with a Striking Curse, the right wrist with a Bone-Breaking Hex, and the gut with a Flinging Hex.

Draco's nose shattered from the first impact, spewing blood everywhere. His wrist snapped from the second impact. And he was hurled back against the shield wall like a rag doll by the third, most powerful impact. He slammed into the wall, then into the floor, and lay there, moaning in agony, blood spurting from his destroyed nose.

Harry slowly got to his feet, tucking his left arm against his chest, pointed his wand at his fallen foe, and cast, "*Expelliarmus*."

Draco's Hawthorne wand soared free of his hand, and Harry easily caught it, sliding his own wand back into the holster. The shield wall dissolved, and he could now hear the roaring of the crowd, the cheers of encouragement and the insults thrown at him from all four Houses.

But Harry ignored them and strode toward Draco, who was struggling to sit up. His good hand slipped on the blood-soaked floor, and his broken arm hit the ground again, causing him to scream in pain.

Harry got down on one knee and looked him right in the eyes. "Come to gloat, Potter?" he gasped.

"No," Harry said. "But I *am* here to humiliate you. You see, Blaise told me you once confided to him that '*all the Mudbloods should be booted out of Hogwarts, and their wands snapped and thrown back in their crying faces. Especially Granger. I'd like to break hers personally, watch her sniveling all over Potter.*'"

Staring directly into Draco's widening, horrified eyes, Harry snapped the Hawthorne wand like a twig. Then he rose, and underhanded the pieces so that they clattered next to Malfoy's face, which was still pressed to the ground.

"Never hurt my friends again. If you do, I'll make what you're feeling now seem like a stomachache by comparison."

Then Harry turned, and walked slowly back across the ring.

As soon as he'd descended the steps, a red-tipped missile slammed into him, locking him in a fierce embrace. "Ouch...*Ginny!*" he gasped.

"Sorry," she said, backing off as she remembered his broken wrist.

He looked over and saw Hermione beaming at him. "That was *brilliant!*" she cried. "The way you fainted Malfoy, lying on the ground like that, then hit him with everything you had. It worked just like you said it would!"

"*Well done,*" Daphne said. His guardian beamed proudly at him, then ruffled his hair, the way she used to when he was much younger. He smiled at her, and then pointed to his wrist. "Of course," she said. She drew her wand, and with two movements healed both the wrist and the cut on his arm. Whole again, Harry allowed both of his friends to throw themselves at him. The exhilaration of victory flowed through him.

Already, Draco had been moved by his father from the ring, which was now sinking back into the ground. The House Tables had reappeared, and the students were now scattering as they landed back in their proper places. The shades were opened, and their lunch began appearing, courtesy of the House Elves. Dumbledore was trying to get everything back to normal as soon as possible.

Daphne had disappeared, presumably to lift her Vow of Vengeance. Hermione grabbed him again, and squeezed him for dear life this time. When she finally let go, he asked, "What was that for?"

"I heard what you said, we all did. Thank you for being my friend, Harry." Hermione's voice was choked up, and tears glistened in her eyes.

"You're welcome," Harry replied, still gasping for air.

"Now sit down, and eat something. C'mon Hermione," Ginny said, pointing firmly at the Slytherin table while keeping her eyes locked on Harry, the tone of her voice indicating that she was taking charge, and wasn't going to take 'no' for an answer. The three friends made their way over, and Harry was met with a mixture of approval, measured interest, and a few hissed expletives. He didn't care. Sitting down next to Ginny, and pulling his girlfriend in close, he wasn't sure he'd felt better in his entire life.

A/N: So, is Harry still a coward? Was his message to Draco not clear enough?

I'm sorry, but one of the most frustrating things I've experienced since I started writing this story is the people writing reviews and messages saying that they've lost respect for Harry because he didn't immediately defend his friend. Somehow, the fact that Harry is a Slytherin, and not a Gryffindor, has yet to sink in. He put a ton of thought into his revenge, and it was as sweet as ever. He managed to force Draco to accept a challenge to a duel before the entire student body. He avenged Hermione and completely and utterly humiliated his rival. Better than him just wasting Malfoy with a Bludgeoning Curse, and getting in huge trouble? I think so.

Harry is simply different than his canon incarnation. He's more calculating and patient. It doesn't mean he's a coward.

Again, you see how the relationship between Harry and Daphne has changed since she nearly destroyed his mind in the Chamber. While still very close, and fanatically loyal to each other, they aren't as physically affectionate, and Daphne acts more like a mentor than a

mother. That was the point of the entire Chamber experience. I wanted to shake up the relationship between Harry and Daphne, change their roles a bit. I try not to torture the characters for no reason.

Harry is becoming something that some of you might not be all that comfortable with. It's beyond Slytherin and Gryffindor. In becoming a war leader, he's going to become somewhat calloused to death, and show a willingness to sacrifice the lives of others for the greater goal. That's what a general is asked to do. He knows that all of his men aren't going to come home in each battle. He's been slowly maturing as the series has gone along. He was just trying to survive in PS, somewhat abnoxious and immature in SH (as well as being terrified by what was happening to him), beginning to accept and plan for what he needed to do in SoD (as well as very angry), and he's fully accepted what needs to be done at this point in this book. He's only going to become more distant, more cold from here. Especially given the losses he's going to suffer.

I've revised the death toll for DR, upping it to six. Bertha Jorkins was an add-on. I wanted to bring back the dreams. They play an important role in canon. The question is that, since Harry is more willing to learn Occlumency and less overtly hateful of Snape (he respects him as a wizard, though he thinks he's a perfectly dreadful human being), will he be more able to cope with the visions. Voldemort is testing Harry right now. He wants to know what he can stomach, how he'll react, if he'll crumble under pressure. Crouch's mission is a bit different this time around.

McGonagall is one of my favorite characters, and in many ways, she's the voice of sanity in this situation. She cares about Harry, and she's horrified by what he's becoming, and what Daphne is making him into. She feels Daphne is being irresponsible in allowing Harry to force a duel. She's probably right. McGonagall is an extremely strong character, a powerful and interesting witch, a Transfiguration master, and Dumbledore's de facto second-in-command.

I think I'm writing a believable relationship between Harry and Ginny. It's one that will sort of stay in the background the whole series. Harry doesn't have time to be a regular teenager, not with everything he

has to deal with. It's a needed distraction, yet it's more than that. But, keep in mind that there is still a massive time-bomb in that relationship: Daphne.

Blaise is a character that I really want to get involved in this story. I started with this chapter, portraying him as trustworthy (again), and a person that legitimately cares about Harry as a person. That said, Hermione isn't going to accept him with open arms. That will be dealt with later.

So, next up is the Second Task. It's also an opportunity for another less-used character to shine. It's a pretty intense chapter, and the ending is pretty dramatic. I'm very happy with the way it turned out. Once my beta gets through it, you'll get a chance to see what I mean.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter 17: A Serpent's Wrath

As it turned out, another three days passed before Hermione was finally released from the Hospital Wing. And even then, Madam Pomfrey seemed rather reluctant to let her go. The reasons for her misgivings quickly became apparent. Hermione tired easily, and would sometimes suffer from headaches that forced her to sit down. The symptoms had improved as the week wore on, and she was able to write her parents a kind, if not entirely honest letter explaining her continued presence at Hogwarts.

Though Ginny was due back tomorrow, Hermione was eager to start working immediately on the Egg Clue, as well as some final research on old pureblood laws. The information she found helped build his case, but she was unable to uncover any precedents for duels involving offenses to Muggleborns. Harry had known there was a chance this wouldn't work. In that case, he would need to figure out another way to neutralize his Slytherin rival and protect his friends. He hoped that wouldn't be necessary.

There was a muffled thump as Hermione closed the large book in her lap. Harry glanced up from what he'd been reading and looked over at her.

"You'd mentioned that Loon..." Hermione stopped, looking horrified. "Loony" was Luna's nickname around Hogwarts, used by people that Hermione didn't want to associate with. "...Luna Lovegood," she corrected, both her cheeks still tinged with red, "...had given you a hint about the Egg Clue?"

"Yes, she did, during the Yule Ball," Harry replied. "A little self-conscious there?"

"Shut up," she snapped at him. "I don't...she *is* a bit odd, Harry, but she can't possibly be as bad as everyone says. Of course, you know her better than I do, and I just assumed..."

"She's *different*, Hermione. She sees the world differently than we do, for reasons that even she doesn't entirely understand. And she's *gifted*."

"You aren't talking about all that nonsense with the Snunkle-Horned Chorkaks, are you?" Hermione asked.

"Crumple-Horned Snorkaks," Harry corrected. "And no, I'm not. I get the sense that she's perfectly aware that everything she says about all those imaginary creatures *is* complete nonsense. It's the other things she says. The things you don't hear unless you've trained yourself to ignore the gibberish."

"Then why does she bother with it?" Hermione asked. "If she's as...gifted as you say, why bother pretending to be some sort of ill-informed conspiracy theorist?"

Harry grimaced. "Look, I don't consider myself an expert on Luna, but I've probably gotten to know her better than anyone else here. I *think* that after her mother died, her father was quite lonely. I think that he *does* believe in Nargles, and Crumple-Horned Snorkaks, and all of those inane conspiracy theories."

"Well I *hope* that's the case, given the rubbish he puts in his newspaper," Hermione interjected. "Have you ever read the *Quibbler*? It's the most illogical, imaginative, and paranoid publication that I've ever read."

"*You*'ve read it?"

Hermione sounded defensive. "Well...I just wanted to know more about it."

"That's Hermione-speak for 'I'll read anything if it stands still long enough,'" Harry observed dryly.

Hermione threw him a half-hearted glare.

Harry fidgeted, turning his wand over in his fingers. "Luna said that water was the answer."

"Pardon?"

"Water is the answer," Harry repeated. "I don't know what to make of that. It certainly isn't the sound of water."

“Something in the water, maybe?” Hermione suggested.

Harry shrugged. “I’m honestly not sure if I’m making this up, but I didn’t get the sense that the *question* concerned the clue itself.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Why is she telling you that water is the answer to something if it has nothing to do with the problem she knows you are trying to solve?” Hermione frowned. “I don’t think she’s one to be deceitful. She wouldn’t give you a hint to lead you in the wrong directions...would she?”

Harry sat forward, exasperated. “I don’t know,” he said. “Sometimes, I don’t know what Luna wants, or expects. I often don’t understand what she’s trying to accomplish. She sent me a letter once that I spent hours trying to decode, but when I asked her about it, she seemed surprised that I was even bothering to search it for meaning.” He sighed. “Maybe it’s best we just try to work this out on our own.”

“Perhaps,” Hermione said. “We could also run it by Ginny, see if she can make any sense of it.” She repeated Luna’s hint, carefully pronouncing every syllable, as if she hoped to pull information from the words themselves. “The Task must have something to do with water.”

“A fat lot of good that does us,” Harry groaned. He was getting more and more frustrated by his inability to understand the Egg Clue. He still had plenty of time, but he recognized that the champions wouldn’t have been given any sort of clue unless the task required significant and specialized preparation.

“Think positive,” Hermione urged.

“I’m trying,” he replied, talking into his hands. “I just have the feeling that we’re missing something. Something that two people as bright as we are shouldn’t be missing. This can’t be as hard as it seems, Hermione.”

She didn’t immediately respond. “Maybe we ought to just wait for Ginny to get back...you know, the Task might take place in the Lake.”

Harry considered that. "Sounds reasonable. The problem is that we're extrapolating that from Luna's advice, not from the egg itself. We might be right, but there's also a possibility that we're wrong, and I won't be prepared when the Task turns out to have nothing to do with the Lake." He got up. "Regardless, I'm done with this. It's time for dinner, anyway. Ginny'll be back tomorrow."

"You're putting a lot of faith in her," Hermione pointed out.

"I didn't mean to suggest anything."

"I'm not saying you did."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

Hermione closed the book on her lap, this time with considerably more force. Harry could feel the impact in his chest. "You know what? You're right. I've had enough of this nonsense for one day."

That night, Harry *dreamed*.

He seemed to glide inches above an aged wooden floor, moving through a darkened hallway lit only by a light emanated from behind a half-open door. The light was also the only evidence the manor had been inhabited for some time. The walls were covered by a thin film of dust, obscuring a pair of very old paintings, each depicting a long-deceased member of the family that had once claimed the spacious home as its own. But the subjects were unmoving, staring blankly into a single, fixed point. This was a Muggle home.

He seemed to slither down the hallway, slipping through the half-open door without moving it an inch. Inside, the source of light was revealed to be a soft glow produced by a roaring fire. A large red armchair dominated the room, facing the fire, its occupant hidden by the high back.

Two other figures were visible as his perspective became fixed and stable. One, short and rotund, with thinning hair and a perpetually terrified expression. The other, a short, slender woman, her dark hair falling well past her shoulders, her eyes cold and cruel.

A serpentine hiss broke the silence. Another series of hissing came from the chair in response. Then, a raspy, high voice spoke. "Nagini reports that more Muggles have been moving about the property...children, mostly. It seems that we attracted more attention than I had intended with the death of that old Muggle."

"Would you like me to deal with the trespassers, my Lord?" the woman asked.

"No. More bodies would only attract more attention. As far as any one in the town knows, this place has been deserted for decades. No need to discourage those assumptions. The wards should keep them away anyway...correct, Wormtail?" There was a blatant threat in that query.

"I believe so, Master," the short man replied, his voice shaking.

"You'd best be right," the raspy voice said. "For my gratitude for finding me in the forest may not spare you my wrath. There must be no mistakes."

"Of course, Master," the frightened man replied.

"Our plans proceed?" The tone of the raspy voice indicated that the speaker already knew the answer.

"Yes," was the woman's reply. "Our man in Hogwarts has escaped detection, even suspicion. He is playing his part brilliantly. As for the rest...he survived the First Task."

"As I expected," the raspy voice replied. "He is strong, stronger than I had anticipated. No matter. He is raw, undisciplined, unrefined...he will not prove to be a challenge."

"Of course not, my Lord," the man replied, perhaps trying to win back his vindictive master's favor.

"Be silent, Wormtail," he hissed. "I have heard enough of your groveling and sniveling." The voice quieted for a moment, then... "Ah...he is here?"

“Who, my Lord?” the woman replied, her eyes scanning the room.

“We have a guest, my dear Alecto. Harry Potter.”

A piercing pain sliced through the fog of the dream, and the scene fell in and out of focus. The pain faded, and the unseen Dark Lord laughed softly. “Yes, he is indeed watching...and listening.”

The short, balding man was now looking around, a film of sweat glistening on his skin, as if expecting to see him standing somewhere in the room. Another cold laugh.”

“He is not physically present, you fool. His body remains safe at Hogwarts...but his mind...his mind has been drawn to this moment. You see, I intend to put on a bit of a demonstration...Wormtail, fetch the prisoner.”

The man looked surprised. “My Lord, I thought-”

“I will not ask again.”

“Yes, my Lord,” the man said. He apologized, then ran frantically toward a door to the right of Harry’s vantage point, disappearing into a darkened corridor. “I want you to see something, Harry. I want you to understand...”

The woman picked at her nails as they waited. Then, the short man returned, carrying a body of a middle-aged woman, wearing nightclothes, indicating she had probably been snatched from her bed. Wormtail set her down on the floor in front of the armchair, then made a frightful retreat, biting at his fingernails as he watched the scene before him unfold.

Harry moved along the floor, so that he was now slightly behind and to the left of the armchair. He saw a small, red-scaled limb resting on the armrest.

“Bertha Jorkins,” the raspy voice said. “She works at the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Her capture was an accident, made necessary after Wormtail allowed himself to be recognized.

The short man backed up a few more steps, shaking violently. He'd nearly bitten his fingernails down to the roots.

"She held information that I needed. I took it. She was..damaged. Yet she still has her uses."

The woman lying unconscious was plump and not particularly attractive. Her dark brown hair was tangled and knotted, her features blackened by smears of earth. Her breathing was shallow, but steady. "I should wake her up for this, should I not, Harry? Crucio."

The woman's eyes flew open, and she began to writhe and roll, her mouth open in full scream. Her shrieks of agony pierced the haze of pain he was experiencing, as if the curse had affected them both. Finally, the figure on the armchair lowered his wand, and the woman's screams stopped. She rolled over, and screamed again when she caught sight of her tormentor. Her cry was silenced as the Dark Lord again raised his wand. "PetrificusCorpus," he whispered.

Bertha's joints locked up, and her body was frozen in position. Her eyes, wide with fear, continued to desperately search her surroundings, like those of a caged animal trying to escape.

"Disappointing," the raspy voice sighed. "Two spells, and I am already feeling the weakening of my magic. A temporary problem only, but an inconvenience nonetheless...no matter. Nagini hasn't been fed in some time." The last words were spoken in English, but contained the underlying hiss of Parseltongue. The scaled arm raised itself off the armrest, and a tiny, bone-like finger pointed directly at the immobile body before him.

Harry realized whose eyes he was seeing out of when he moved closer, reared back, and struck, two long, slender fangs puncturing the hopeless witch's chest. Nagini struck again...and again. But no blood flowed from the wounds. Bertha's eyes glazed over, as the venom began to course through her bloodstream.

"Finite," the raspy voice said.

The body of Bertha Jorkins flew into spasms and convulsions, even as blood welled up through the half-dozen wounds in her torso. It

spread across the floor, slowly pooling at the feet of the armchair. A forked tongue tasted the air.

“Remember what you have seen, Harry Potter. Remember that I am the Master of Death itself.” A high, cold laugh followed this declaration.

The scene faded away as the most intense and brutal agony he’d felt thus far assaulted him, tearing him away...

Harry Potter shot bolt upright, the last echoes of Lord Voldemort’s parting laugh ringing in his ears. His scar burned fiercely, and he closed his eyes, clenched his teeth, tried with every fiber of his being to suppress a scream.

Slowly, the pain faded. He struggled to disentangle himself from sweat-drenched sheets. He felt an unnatural cold penetrate his very being, and he shivered violently.

Then he noticed that the curtains to his four-poster bed were open. And he noticed the black face that loomed out from the Darkness. It spoke. “Potter?”

The voice was familiar. “Blaise,” he gasped out. “What-”

“You alright? Must have been one hell of a nightmare.”

“How-”

“You were moaning in your sleep,” Blaise explained. I hadn’t noticed that before, so I went over to see what was going on. I unlocked your curtains...pretty advanced security spell, by the way...and found you like this...”

Harry was breathing hard, and he could feel the sweat drying on his skin. His stomach revolted, but he forced it down, taking deep gulps of precious air. A part of him was angry at Blaise for violating his privacy, another part was grateful that one of his classmates actually cared enough to see if he was alright. At the moment, both parts were being routed by the one that kept playing ghostly images of his dream over and over again.

Blaise moved closer, sitting on the edge of the bed, scrutinizing his forehead. He looked genuinely concerned. "Potter, your scar's bleeding."

Confused, Harry lifted a trembling hand and brushed it across his forehead. He felt something wet and sticky. When he brought it down and examined his fingertips, they glistened in the faint light. His eyes were adjusted now, and he continued to stare in amazement and fear at his hand. "Hasn't done that in a while," he breathed.

The last time it had, during his first year, he and Hermione had nearly died while tracking down a wounded unicorn. Harry had needed to be carried to the Hospital Wing by Hagrid, unconscious and barely clinging to life.

"Should I take you to the Hospital Wing, Potter?" Blaise asked. The worry in his voice was real.

"Anyone else hear?" Harry asked anxiously, still looking at his bloody fingers.

"Just one other," Blaise said. "You're lucky most of the boys in this room sleep like rocks."

"Who?"

"Nott's awake, I think. Hasn't come out yet, but I saw a light inside his curtains," Blaise whispered. "Forget embarrassing yourself, Potter, you look awful."

"Thanks," Harry replied sarcastically. It came okay as a gasp of air. "I'll be okay. He tried to wipe his forehead with the sleeve of his robe. It came away damp with blood. Harry twisted his legs out of the sweat-soaked sheets. His stomach revolted again. This time, he scrambled out of bed, nearly knocking over Blaise, and stumbled into the bathroom, barely reaching the toilet in time. He retched, once, twice, three times, and then fell back on his legs, panting. He wiped the sick from his lips with the other sleeve. The bathroom was slightly lit, and he could now see the bloodstains on his robes.

He heard Blaise behind him. The situation was eerily familiar, except that time, the nightmare had been just that, and the observer had been the trustworthy house-elf Dobby, not one of his peers. "Blaise, I'll be *fine*."

"Right," he said, although he sounded incredulous, and didn't move an inch. "Are you sure you don't want-"

"No," Harry bit out. "Just give me a minute. Never mention this to anyone, alright? Go back to sleep."

"Potter, with all due respect for your privacy, *that* was no ordinary nightmare," Blaise said. "I've never seen anything like that. And your scar..."

"Maybe I just have really bad memories," Harry suggested, trying to drive the other Slytherin away. "I've certainly got plenty of material."

"You said your scar hadn't bled like that in some time."

"It doesn't *concern* you. I appreciate that you care, Blaise, but I'm *fine*." Harry turned around and fixed him with bloodshot, but determined, eyes.

"Very well. But I'm going to make sure you talk to *somebody* about this, even if I have to tell Granger what happened." When Harry began to object, he held up a hand. "Nobody else, Potter. But that whole thing was really weird and just a little scary, if you don't mind me saying."

"Alright, I'll talk to someone about it. Are you happy? Can I go back to bed? Or are you going to interrogate me some more?" Harry demanded.

Blaise nodded, and left the bathroom. Harry flushed the toilet, got up, and walked over to the mirror. He stared at himself. He lifted his sweat-and-blood-covered bangs, and saw that his scar had scabbed over. Daphne wasn't going to like this, or any of the details of what he had seen.

Or, indeed, the way in which he had witnessed it.

Shaking his head, he staggered back to his bed, shut the curtains, and dug his wand out from beneath his pillow to cast a pair of new security spells on it, as well as a Silencing Charm. He could have kicked himself for overlooking the latter. The last thing he needed was to appear weak before his fellow Slytherins, even if it was only Blaise. Nott probably knew what was happening to."

Harry lay down, and almost instantly fell into an exhausted sleep. His last thought was that he and Ginny would be back together again the next morning. The week had seemed like an eternity. Her gentle, delicate features helped to soothe him back into the abyss.

It was no more than twenty seconds after he'd greeted Ginny with a quick peck on the lips that he saw Blaise Zabini giving him a meaningful look over her shoulder. It was no more than five minutes later than he was explaining what had happened the previous night to Ginny and Hermione. It was no more than forty-five minutes later that all three of them were seated in the office of Albus Dumbledore. Also present were Professors McGonagall and Snape.

Dumbledore looked at Harry over his half-moon spectacles, and asked him to describe, in as much detail as possible, what he had seen that last night. Dumbledore was not betraying much concern, although Harry knew that on the inside, things were probably much different. He described the setting, although he hadn't seen enough to really know where Voldemort was. Now that he was awake, he recognized the Death Eaters as Alecto Carrow and Peter Pettigrew.

The murder of Bertha Jorkins was the hardest to describe. He managed to get out the gruesome details, including Voldemort's use of a Body Freezing spell to prolong the witch's agony, and his use of Nagini to finally finish her off. McGonagall was white by the time he was finished. Ginny's hand was so tightly clutching his that it was in danger of cutting off circulation, and Hermione was brushing tears from her eyes. Snape, for his part, looked even more dour.

Dumbledore looked contemplative. "This is indeed concerning, Harry," he finally said. "Severus, you had said Mr. Potter was making good progress in his Occlumency?"

"Yes," Snape said, looking at Harry as he spoke. "Potter showed surprising aptitude and self-control. By no means has he mastered the art, but I felt he was proficient enough to keep out the Dark Lord in his weakened state. I intended to do further work in the coming weeks."

Harry nodded a silent agreement, and Snape looked satisfied. When Harry treated him with respect, he was easily able to get along with his head of House. When he didn't, he began to remind the Potions Master of James Potter, which was never a good thing.

At that moment, the large doors to Dumbledore's sanctum swing open, and an angry, disheveled, and exhausted Daphne Dressler strode through them. Her robes were dirty and torn, and dark patches under her eyes testified to the fact that she hadn't slept recently. Dried blood still marked a small cut below her right ear. Her eyes searched out Dumbledore. "You *ought* to have learned by now," she began, moving in front of the three students, "that you don't interrogate Harry, about *anything*, without my tacit permission or my actual presence."

"*Daphne*," McGonagall whispered, shocked by her former student's behavior. His guardian didn't even look at her.

"I meant no offense, Daphne," Dumbledore responded, hands open in a gesture of peace. "I had not expected your return for several days, and once Mr. Potter bring this issue to my attention, I felt it best that I learn as much as I could as quickly as I could."

Daphne's glare suggested she didn't quite believe him on that, but she backed down. A wave of her wand produced a chair next to Hermione's, and she sat down, eyes still locked on Hogwarts' headmaster. "So, what's going on?"

Harry explained again, this time in less graphic detail. His recollections were unpleasant at best, frightening at worst. Daphne's eyes betrayed little fear, but her features tightened. "So despite Snape's Occlumency training, Voldemort was able to pierce your defenses."

"Was that an attack on my teaching abilities, Dressler?" Snape growled. "After all, I only took on the responsibility because you were too frightened to cause your precious ward any further anguish."

"That's right," Daphne snapped back. Knowing what he now knew, Daphne's blatant hatred of Severus Snape now made a great deal more sense. "It takes a certain degree of callous and heartlessness to dig out a child's most painful memories in the name of *education*."

"Are you *suggesting*-"

"*Enough*," Dumbledore said, his voice carrying the same magical authority that he often used to quiet the Great Hall. The bickering pair stared at him, as if they were children waiting for the judgment of a parent. "This is not about either of *you*," he said. "This is about Harry, and about Lord Voldemort. Please, for the sake of him, put your past grudges aside."

Daphne fixed Snape with a death glare, but nodded. Snape barely acknowledged the Headmaster. "Both of you care for Harry, in different ways. Regardless," he said, this time looking at Harry, who was starting to wonder if he'd been forgotten. "That Lord Voldemort was able to penetrate Harry's mind with such ease creates serious problems. Severus, is my concern justified?"

"Absolutely not," Snape said. "The Dark Lord is the most skilled Legilimens I have ever encountered. His abilities can extend far beyond his line of sight. Although I've never known him to pull information from great distances."

"It's unheard of," Daphne interjected. "Voldemort is one of the most powerful and skilled Dark wizards in history, but even his power has limits. How can he affect Harry, in his weakened state, from such great distances?"

Harry had been turning that very question over and over again in his mind from the moment he'd awakened. Clearly, there was something unusual about his relationship with Voldemort. They had some kind of connection that no one seemed to understand.

“Harry,” Dumbledore said, addressing him directly this time. “You said that not only did your scar burn, but it actually bled this time.”

“Yes,” Harry said. “My scar has always been...a sort of proximity alarm of sorts, for Voldemort. It burns when he draws close. It burns more fiercely when he becomes angry.” In his peripheral vision, he saw Hermione give him a frightened look. Ginny’s hand, which had relaxed a bit, squeezed his even harder, although she remained silent, her attention focused on the Headmaster.

Dumbledore considered Harry’s words, but Daphne broke the silence. “There has to be some sort of connection,” she reasoned. “Obviously, one related to his scar. There’s also the matter of his ability to speak Parseltongue. That’s certainly not inherited – his family doesn’t have a single recorded Parselmouth on record.” McGonagall gasped a bit at this latest revelation; she obviously hadn’t known about it before hand.

Dumbledore remained silent, his forehead furrowed in thought. Then, without explanation, he reached behind him and took the Sorting Hat in his hand. He gently placed it on his head, and his eyes disappeared beneath the brim. Snape and Daphne frowned in confusion, but they stayed silent, waiting for Dumbledore to speak. Finally, he nodded, removed the Sorting Hat, placing it gently on the table behind his desk. “As you are aware, or should be, the Sorting Hat is not merely an artifact used to determine House placement. It is one of the oldest and most powerful magical relics known to Wizardkind, created by the combined magic of all four founders, two of whom were quite skilled at Legilimency.”

“Rowena Ravenclaw and Salazar Slytherin,” Hermione whispered in explanation.

“Correct, Miss Granger,” Dumbledore said, having clearly heard her. Hermione’s cheeks reddened slightly, although Harry couldn’t tell if she was embarrassed for being caught speaking out of turn or because she had been complimented by Dumbledore. It was probably a combination of both, he decided.

"The Sorting Hat merely confirmed a number of my suspicions," Dumbledore continued. "First, it recalled that when it was sorting you, Harry, it felt a foreign and yet quite familiar presence in your mind."

"Tom Riddle," Harry said.

"Correct," Dumbledore said. "It recognized that you were a Parselmouth, recognized your potential, and a number of other traits that also characterized a young Tom Riddle. A desire to lead, to prove your worth to others, and to reach the very limits of your magical potential. Though your placement into Slytherin did not take your connection with Tom into account, you were placed there because the Sorting Hat felt you would prosper in Slytherin."

"I can't argue with its choice," Harry admitted. As a Slytherin, he'd had a chance to become involved in pureblood politics that he wouldn't have had as a Gryffindor, like his parents, or a Ravenclaw, like his guardian. Slytherin had given a chance to improve his ability to read body language, to detect subtle motives, and to improve his self-control.

"What I wished to confirm was my suspicion that there is in fact a powerful mental connection between you and Tom, a connection forged on the night that he gave you your scar."

"How does the connection work?" Daphne asked.

"Even I do not completely understand it. Harry is, of course, unique in having survived a Killing Curse as an untrained infant. His curse scar is unlike any that I have ever encountered, either in person or in my extensive research on the subject," Dumbledore said. "Regardless, if Lord Voldemort can send you visions of the kind that you experienced last night, there is certainly a possibility that he could penetrate deeper into your memories."

"Making me a security risk," Harry said, bitterly.

"I can continue your instruction in Occlumency, but I'm unsure if your ability to keep out the Dark Lord will improve," Snape said. "If that is indeed the case, then you just summed up your situation better than any of us could have. There is certain information that may have to

be...withheld from you. If the Dark Lord continues to grow stronger, there is even a chance he may be able to take over your mind."

Harry closed his eyes as fragmented images of his possession by Riddle's shades in his second year flashed through his mind. The Basilisk...Daphne, enraged...Hermione, slumping lifelessly to the ground after being struck by the Mind Death Curse...

"There must be something we can do," McGonagall urged, looking at her despondent student. "We cannot be entirely helpless."

"Maybe...we're not?"

Harry's eyes opened, and joined the eyes of everyone else in the room in staring at Hermione, who looked shocked by her own daring.

"Elaborate," Daphne said. It sounded like an order.

"Well...was Voldemort really *inside* Harry's mind last night, or was the opposite true? Perhaps he can draw Harry's consciousness into his own mind, but given enough training, at least at long distances, Harry can keep him from penetrating any further?"

Snape looked ready to dismiss the suggestion, but Dumbledore spoke first, a hint of hope shining in his blue eyes. "As always, Miss Granger, your astuteness is simply remarkable for a witch of your age."

This time Hermione went bright red, ducking her head slightly.

"Do you think she could actually be right?" Daphne asked. There was a disturbing desperation in her voice.

Dumbledore nodded. "It seems that by assuming the worst, we may have overlooked the limits of the connection. I believe that Miss Granger may have a very valid point. The connection is like a bridge, a constant connection between Harry and Lord Voldemort. But to continue the analogy, I see no reason why Harry could not construct a roadblock, to prevent Voldemort from seeing into his mind at a distance, or controlling him from afar. I suggest that Professor Snape continue to instruct you in Occlumency, with a focus on protecting

your memories, not keeping a foreign mind out altogether. That may be impossible in this case.”

“What about at short range?” Ginny asked, her voice squeaky.

Snape’s expression was deadly serious. “At that range,” he said softly, “the Dark Lord could penetrate the mind of any individual. The scar, except for the pain it may cause Potter, will have little effect on his ability to repel a mental assault.”

“But it is possible to prevent Harry from coming into such close contact with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, is it not?” McGonagall asked. “If the connection can be rendered harmless from a distance...”

“It would not be *harmless*, even if Granger turns out to be correct,” Snape corrected. “The Dark Lord could still draw Potter out, show him what he wanted him to see. That, in all likelihood, cannot be avoided.”

“I can deal with nightmares,” Harry replied confidently.

Snape’s gaze was discomfiting. “Can you, Mr. Potter, when the dreams are not dreams, but *reality*? The Dark Lord often enjoyed tormenting his enemies before he killed them, driving them mad until they were literally begging for death. I would not approach this with such a cavalier attitude.”

Ginny’s hand was a vise-grip now, but he barely even felt the pain. He knew Snape was right. He knew that he was in for a rough go of things.

“Does anyone else know anything about this connection?” Daphne asked him. “Or even have the slightest reason to suspect anything unusual?”

Harry winced. “Blaise Zabini probably suspects something.”

“As the Slytherins in your dormitory go, Mr. Zabini is mostly harmless,” Snape said.

“Well, we’re not exactly friends...but we’re on relatively good terms. I think I can trust him...to an extent.”

Daphne nodded, content with his answer. “I believe we’ve gained all the information we can from him,” she said.

“Perhaps,” Dumbledore replied. “I merely ask, Harry, that you report any further dreams or visions that you believe may have been sent by Lord Voldemort. Tom is a brilliant man, but it is quite possible that he, or one of his minions, may reveal more about his plans than he intends.”

“Albus, you’re treating him like a source of information!” McGonagall explained. “*He’s just a boy!*”

“I can handle it, Professor, though I appreciate your concern. I know what I have to do.”

From McGonagall’s slightly horrified look, she believed him...and probably wished she didn’t. He felt Daphne’s hand on his shoulder, and felt Ginny’s hand fall away from his. That puzzled him, although he didn’t think much of it.

“Then our meeting is concluded,” Daphne declared.

“You will meet me Wednesday night for Occlumency lessons,” Snape told him, then left, his cape flapping behind him. Harry rose, as did Ginny and Hermione. Both looked rather uncomfortable, but for different reasons. Ginny’s gaze kept skipping from Daphne to the floor, and back again.

Once they were outside, he spoke quietly to his guardian. “I’d best go to lunch with the others. Why don’t you get yourself cleaned up, and we can talk this afternoon? Meet me at the Fifth Floor landing, and we’ll find someplace private.”

Daphne nodded her agreement. She gently brushed aside his bangs, and stared for a moment at his scabbed-over scar. Then she removed her hand, and the bangs fell to conceal his unique mark once again. She walked away, and Ginny and Hermione came over to him, their eyes full of questions. Harry could give them no answers.

After lunch, Harry attended Transfiguration with Hermione. McGonagall seemed strangely unfocused, and kept looking his way. When class ended, he managed to escape her efforts to talk to him alone. He'd need to clear the air between them, but not today.

He found Daphne waiting exactly where he'd asked her to be, looking refreshed and restored. She had probably returned to the home she was renting in Hogsmeade, washed, rested, changed into fresh dark-blue robes, and even shortened her hair. It struck Harry at that moment how beautiful she might be if not for the pair of scars that marred her face and neck. He led her over to the entrance to the Room of Requirement, then silently walked past it and back three times, focusing on a single thought: *I need a place to sit and talk.*"

Finally, the texture of the door pushed out of the blank castle wall. Daphne didn't so much as blink. She wore a sad smile. "I suppose it was only a matter of time before you found this place." Harry realized he'd never actually mentioned where he had been training. "James practically claimed it as his own, scarcely ever let Lily or I in here before they started dating."

"Wonderful. My primary training arena used to also be my parents' make-out spot."

Daphne snorted, a genuine smile lighting her face. "I suppose that *is* accurate. James would definitely be amused by the irony..." Her smile fell.

Harry pushed open the door, revealing a small space occupied by a large blue couch and an empty fireplace. A glass coffee table was placed in between, with a kettle and two teacups.

They each took a seat, about a third of a meters' space between them. Daphne poured them each a cup, but didn't move them from the saucer. She sat back, looking at him. For a moment, neither of them spoke. "How did your trip go?" Harry asked.

"As well is to be expected," Daphne admitted. "I was able to stay mostly out of sight, and gathered a little intelligence, but much of it

was in the form of rumors and odd stories, told by wizards and Muggles alike.”

“You get into a fight?”

“One wizard didn’t seem to understand my message to stay away from me. I got into a bit of a scuffle. He’ll be fine in a week or so,” she assured him.

Harry winced. That probably meant a broken bone...or three. “What did you find out?”

“There have been strange sightings in the Dark Forests,” Daphne said. “Suspicious animal activity, even rumors of vampire and werewolf sightings.”

“But werewolves are-”

“I know,” she said. “But the people there tend to cast out those afflicted by Lycanthropy, force them to live alone in the woods. Remus would not be welcomed there.”

“Right.”

Daphne paused for a moment, then reached over and took a sip of her tea, before setting it back down.

“Are you worried?” she asked.

“About the scar, and my connection?”

She nodded.

“Yes, I suppose...it’s not a comforting thought, and the vision last night...” he shook his head. “His cruelty, his love of inflicting pain...”

“It’s horrifying,” she said. “And it’s a trait shared by many of his Death Eaters. He tends to attract just about every magical psychopath that lives to his side, turns them into murderous, heartless killers. Bellatrix Lestrange is one of them. Antonin Dolohov is another. They feel no

remorse, no regret for committing even the most brutal and senseless of violent acts. They are monsters, just as he is a monster.”

“Just as Rosier was.”

“Yes,” she replied. “He might have been the worst of the lot. Bellatrix, for all her *creativity*, has a strong preference for the Cruciatus Curse. Dolohov always intends to murder his victims eventually. Rosier could sustain himself on the agony of others. He tortured and killed as if it was a basic need, like the need to eat, drink, or breathe. He hated killing, because it ended their pain. The world is far better with him gone.”

“But, Edmond...”

“I don’t know which one of them did it,” Daphne interrupted, her voice harsh. “Their orders were to kill both of us, and escape. Even Rosier did not question a direct order from his Master...and friend.”

“Do you think Hermione is right?”

“Harry, I hope to Merlin that she is. I can’t bear the thought of what happened to you in the Chamber...what I did to you...happening again.”

“I forgave you for that, you know,” Harry reminded her. “You weren’t of stable mind. You weren’t thinking straight.”

“I still allowed it to happen, made a conscious choice not to fight it, and for that, I can *never* forgive myself.”

Harry fell silent again. This conversation was bringing up memories that neither one of them wanted to contemplate. “I think I’ve found a way to force Draco into a duel.”

“Good,” Daphne said. “What will your argument consist of?”

Harry explained the details of what Hermione had found.

Daphne contemplated them for a moment. “It’s sufficient. I’ll be there to argue your case at any rate. And I have leverage over Lucius.”

Harry knew she was referring to the Vow of Vengeance she had sworn while he lay unconscious in the Hospital Wing. Blaming Lucius, correctly in Harry's mind, for the Diary coming into her ward's possession, she swore that if Lucius ever caused Harry deliberate harm again, than she would afflict Draco in kind. It was the kind of action by his guardian with which he was extremely uncomfortable. "I'd want to stage the duel in front of the school. I want Draco's humiliation to be public."

"Are you sure you aren't underestimating him?" Daphne asked. "I have no doubt that Draco has received significant training in dueling and combat spells from numerous private tutors. Lucius would want Draco, as his heir, to one day be able to match him in power and ability."

"I've considered that," Harry said. "He'll be no pushover, but he has a number of weaknesses I can use against him. He's overconfident when things go right, and easily frustrated when they go wrong. If he's unable to reel in his emotions, he'll be vulnerable."

"Any conditions?"

"No Unforgivable Curses. And nothing that has a significant likelihood of resulting in death. Not for this kind of duel."

"That might make Dumbledore better able to stomach it, at least. He'll fight you on this, Harry."

"I know. But I've made my decision. And I have the law on my side."

"Law he undoubtedly does not recognize, but the Ministry does, and that's what matters," Daphne concluded.

"Yes," Harry said. He looked away from her.

"I'm proud of you, Harry."

"What?" He turned to face her, and saw her words echoed in her expression.

"I'm proud of you, because you are taking responsibility for yourself. You are standing up for yourself, and for your friends. And you have carefully considered the consequences of your actions. That represents a kind of maturity that parents prize in their children.

The implications of her statement were as obvious as they were unsurprising. To her, Harry Potter was her flesh-and-blood son, and nothing could change that. "Thank you," he said.

"When do you want the duel to take place?"

"Soon. I want to get this out of the way. I still need to figure out the Egg Clue."

Daphne's prideful look turned to one of concern. "Still stuck on that, are you? Hermione too?"

Harry nodded.

"Perhaps you should look elsewhere for help, then?" she asked. "It seems that you and Hermione are locked in a way of thinking that is bringing you no closer to the answer."

"I'll keep that in mind," Harry said.

Daphne moved closer to him, and he allowed himself to be pulled into her arms. Daphne didn't speak, and neither did he. There was no need for it. He returned her tight embrace, wondering how he could have ever come this far if not for her. What would have become of him if he'd been raised by Lily's sister, as Dumbledore had intended. Would he even be a Slytherin? Would he even be at Hogwarts?

He could not answer those questions, and he didn't really have any desire to, in any case.

"Thursday," Harry said, pulling out of her arms. "I'll challenge him on Thursday. Snape should be present, as should Lucius, I suppose."

"Alright, I'll be there," she promised. "I'm going to be away until then, however. As a representative of the Ministry, I have to actually make

an appearance there once in a while. I'll be teaching some classes on defensive spells and tactics to the new Auror recruits."

"You'll be a fantastic teacher," he assured her. She smiled.

"Hermione and Ginny are probably waiting for you," Daphne said. "You should go and find them."

"You aren't coming?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'll remain here for a little while. I could use some time to think."

Harry rose, and moved toward the door. "Alright, I guess I'll see you on Thursday."

She nodded again, and he opened the door, checked that no one was around, and slipped outside.

Alone now, Daphne stared aimlessly into the empty fireplace, a tempest of emotions racing through her mind.

She felt wetness on her cheek, as a solitary tear dropped from her right eye. She wiped it away, trying to banish her deepest fears with it.

Dumbledore's surprise was etched into his ancient face, his eyes wide with a mix of confusion and even a hint of anger. "Absolutely not, Mr. Potter. Whatever grievances you might have with Mr. Malfoy, no matter how legitimate they may be, will not be settled by a formal duel in this school as long as I am its Headmaster."

Daphne fixed him with a gaze that might have included a tinge of regret. "I'm sorry, Albus, but you don't have the right to interfere. By the terms of the Amendment of 1612 to the Charter of Dueling, Harry is perfectly within his legal rights to challenge Draco to a duel. And because of the nature of the offense, Draco is required to accept."

Harry had scarcely ever seen Dumbledore angry. His face was set and strained. His eyes were piercing and seemed to darken somewhat. "Daphne, that law is ancient and barbaric."

"Nonetheless," Daphne said, holding up a hand, "It was never officially annulled by the Ministry of Magic. As such, it still governs this situation. Harry has challenged; Draco must accept. They will duel to settle the grievance. Harry wishes to set terms that will insure that both of them emerge from the ring alive. But there is nothing that you can do, Dumbledore. If you try to expel Harry..."

That option had never even occurred to him, but given Dumbledore's state of mind, it was a disturbingly *real* possibility.

"...the Pureblood Assembly will have your head on a platter," she finished. "Albus, I'm sorry. I don't mean to usurp your authority, and I've always had the greatest of respect-"

"Yet you *are* usurping his authority," McGonagall bit out, sounding enraged and shocked. "And though you claim to respect him, you are scarcely *showing* it at the moment. I don't *believe* you, Daphne. He's a *child*! They are both *children*!"

"In that, you are quite wrong, Minerva," Daphne said softly. "But that's irrelevant." She spun to face Lucius. The rage in her glare was cold. Her hatred of him surpassed her capacity to express it. "Lucius, do you object?"

"This is highly *irregular*, Dressler," he said in his usually haughty tone. His hand fell on Draco's shoulder. For his part, the younger Slytherin looked composed and determined. If he was frightened, he didn't betray any signs of it. "Morally..."

Daphne scoffed.

"...morally," Lucius continued, "I do not agree with your ward's course of action. But legally, I can find no holes in your argument. Draco does not deny the allegations, not does he regret his decisions that night." Harry hadn't been sure it was possibly for McGonagall and Dumbledore to grow any paler, but they did exactly that as they listened to Lucius Malfoy speak. "They will duel. But I want something in return."

"You are hardly in a position to ask," Daphne told him haughtily.

"But only *you* are in a position to grant it," Lucius countered. "Lift the Vow of Vengeance."

"You have no right-" Daphne began.

"I have not pursued any legal action to this point. The Vow was sworn on questionable grounds to begin with. I have friends, Dressler, friends that would like to see you carted off to Azkaban with the Death Eaters you imprisoned there," Lucius warned.

Daphne thought for a moment, and then nodded. "Very well. I will lift the Vow..." Her eyes bored into the senior Malfoy, as she spoke, and her voice was stiff and hard. She was making it absolutely clear that she was merely being accommodating, and wasn't giving an inch. It also spoke volumes of her confidence in Harry. Harry also got the sense, from the way that she trailed off, that she wasn't quite finished.

"Excellent," Lucius replied. There was little enthusiasm in his voice, and his hatred of the woman standing across from him was barely concealed.

Daphne raised a finger, an awful smile lighting her face. "I will lift the Vow...if Harry emerges as the victor."

Lucius sneered at her, but he had already accepted the agreement, and could not renege on it or insist on re-negotiating it without losing his honor and having his reputation suffer. It was far too high a price to pay. "Done. You agree, Draco?"

"Yes," the younger Malfoy said, his cold eyes locked with Harry's. "I'll fight him. You're going to regret this, Potter."

"We'll see," Harry countered.

He looked back at the others. Dumbledore looked defeated, seemed to have aged a million years in just a few minutes. McGonagall looked heartbroken. Snape looked no more or less sour than he'd been since Harry had issued the challenge.

"Where, when, and what are the conditions?" Lucius asked.

Daphne looked to Harry. This was his choice.

He took a deep breath, calming his mind. That was one of the many things they'd worked on in his most recent, and relatively successful, Occlumency lesson the previous evening.

"Tomorrow, at noon, in the Great Hall. No Unforgivables. No curses used that could be reasonably expected to cause death."

"Well, at least there's *that*," McGonagall said bitterly. Harry could see that her eyes glistening with unshed tears. A slight pang of regret passed through him, but he let it pass.

Draco had stepped forward, almost stumbling, and extended a hand. Harry crossed to him, grasped his rivals hand, and shook it.

"Then it is done."

"The students *had* been wishing for another spectacle," Snape remarked, sounding disinterested. "I'll inform Mr. Filch."

Lucius nodded curtly, then took Draco out.

Dumbledore rose. "Daphne, I would like-"

"No, Albus," she interrupted him. "Not now. Harry needs to prepare, and I intend to help him." She gestured, and Harry followed her out.

He felt the crushing weight of Dumbledore's disappointment the entire way.

When Harry arrived at the Great Hall, clad in the same black battle robes he'd worn during the First Task, flanked by Hermione to his right and Ginny to his left, the chamber was already full of excited students.

The tables had vanished from sight, replaced by a large dueling ring elevated about a meter above the floor. Around the ring, much of the student body of Hogwarts milled about. Wagers and predictions were

made (despite the fact that gambling was very much against the rules).

There had been no formal announcement of the day's event, but word had leaked out anyway, and news of a formal, *legal* duel spread like wildfire. Despite the lack of any kind of seating arrangements, the students had roughly arranged themselves by House. The Gryffindors were the most raucous; obviously, they were thrilled to see a pair of Slytherins they roundly disliked going at it.

The teachers had not been required to attend, indeed McGonagall had probably urged them to stay away, but most of them were there, up at the Head Table, which remained in place. Daphne was also there, sitting alone adjacent to Mad-Eye Moody.

It was Dumbledore's worst nightmare, Harry knew. The duel was going ahead despite his most vehement protests, and the students could probably think of little else more exciting than watching a pair of hated rivals trying to beat the snot out of each other. This was a spectacle; this was blood sport. And as the violence and brutality of Quidditch bore witness, the wizarding world had a strange soft spot for dangerous human competition.

They made their way over to the near entrance of the ring, unfortunately, located just in front of the Gryffindors. He ignored the jeers, the insults, and the taunting. He was focused on only one thing.

Hermione looked like she was about to either faint or burst into a panicked rant. The stress was etched on Ginny's face as well. Once they stopped, he turned to her. "I'll be alright," he told her. "Don't worry about it. One way or the other, I'll be alright."

Ginny nodded, and Harry drew her in close. Hermione stood off to the side, then could stand it no more and sat down on the stairs leading to the near entrance, her head in her hands, berating herself for ever helping Harry make the duel possible. Harry held Ginny in his arms, amazed at how close they'd become in so little time. He'd always cared for her, but now that they were involved, both seemed to take it up a notch. Perhaps the fact that the relationship was now official allowed them to overcome the awkwardness caused by mutual attraction that had been building between them before the ball.

"You know, I'm honestly not sure who I'm supposed to root for."

Ginny jerked, tearing herself out of his embrace, and started digging in her robes for her wand. Her eyes blazed with rage as she stared at her brother. "I'm in half a mind to hex you so bad that Madam Pomfrey won't even recognize you," she bit out. "Go away, Ron."

Harry stared in wonderment of Ron's intense stubbornness and stupidity, as he continued. "It's a tough choice between that git Malfoy and your new *boyfriend*."

"Well then that's just sad," Ginny said. "Your priorities are so screwed up that you've forgotten where your fucking loyalties lie," she cursed at him.

Ron took that like a blow. "Ginny, he's not--"

"He's not *what*? Family? Merlin, Ron, I'm just speechless. You selfish, two-faced, pathetic, over-protective..."

"Whoa, looks like you've got little Ginny all worked up, ickle Ronniekins" George interrupted. Harry stifled a snort.

"Yeah, Ron, you'd best back down, else there might be two duels going on today," Fred advised.

"Besides, Harry's okay," George continued.

"He's a bright lad."

"Knows what'll happen to him if he breaks Ginny's little heart."

"Not you, too," Ginny hissed. "Listen. It was my decision to become involved with Harry. *Mine*. You have absolutely *no say in this*. I love both of you...all three of you," she amended, shooting a death glare at Ron. "But I don't need your help, and I certainly don't *want* it. I'm a *Slytherin*, and I'm proud of it, Ron, so you'd best stop blaming Harry for *corrupting* your little sister, or any other such nonsense...now sod off, all of you, unless you're planning to offer Harry good luck."

"Sounds reasonable enough," George said. "Quite well put, Ginny."

"Yeah, ickle Ginniekins is growing up, right before our very eyes...well then, Good Luck Potter."

"Yeah, may you splatter Malfoy's innards all over the ceiling, so that Filch has to scrape it off with a butter knife," George finished.

Ginny was still staring at Ron. "Well?" she asked.

"I'll go," he said, stomping off. He shot Harry another glare as he did. Harry returned it with the haughty sneer that he knew infuriated Ron so much. As usual, it did the trick.

"Stop provoking him," Hermione yelled over the noise. "You're only making it worse."

"Dumbledore's getting up," Ginny said.

Harry turned. Dumbledore was now standing, and waved his wand in the air, producing a loud *BANG* that silenced the crowd.

"Good morning to all of you. I assume you have all gather to witness the duel that is about to take place. I must now insist that all students leave a minimum space of two meters between themselves and the dueling ring." Dumbledore sighed, the sigh of a man resigned to his fate. "I would like to ask the two contestants to please take their positions in the ring."

Harry gave Ginny a quick peck on the cheek, then ascended the stairs and stood in the small circle at the top. Draco did the same, staring across at him. The distance seemed considerably farther than it really was.

"This duel, called by Mr. Harry James Potter on the grounds that Mr. Draco Abraxas Malfoy committed a grave offense against Miss Hermione Jane Granger on the night of December 25th, using the legal justification given by the 1612 Amendment to the Charter of Dueling. As an orphan, with no living, magical, blood relatives, Mr. Potter has the right to designate who he considers to be part of his extended family, and therefore on whose behalf he can challenge an offender to a duel. In this case, Mr. Potter has claimed Miss Granger

as a sibling in his extended family.” Dumbledore was clearly reading a pre-rehearsed speech at this point.

“The conditions of the duel, as laid down by Mister Potter, witnessed by Mrs. Daphne Artemis O’Connor Dressler, the challengers’ legal guardian, and Mr. Lucius Saljean Malfoy, the offender’s father, are as follows: the use of Unforgivable Curses is strictly prohibited. Also illegal are the use of any curses used primarily with the intent to kill. Violation of these rules is grounds for immediate termination of the duel, with the offender, in this case, the wizard that uses a prohibited spell, disqualified and his opponent automatically named the victor. In any other case, victory will be judged by Disarmament.”

Dumbledore took a deep breath. This time, what he said came from the heart. “I would like to implore each and every one of you to look upon this as a one-time occurrence. This duel was allowed over my expressed protest, and legal action is being taken to amend the Charter as we speak. Duels are not the way to settle arguments. They are a relic of the past, an anachronistic pureblood wizarding tradition that has somehow been allowed to survive to this day.” Harry didn’t need to look at Hermione to know she was gazing at Dumbledore with a look of deepest gratitude and approval.

“Both duelists will now bow, as a sign of respect.” Both of them did, although neither lifted his eyes from the other. As he lifted his head up, a green, transparent energy field descended from the ceiling and surrounded the ring. It was essentially a huge Servos Shield, designed to protect the spectators from stray spells. Harry slowed his breathing, focused on the task at hand. He tuned out the sounds of the excited crowd, tuned out everything but the beating of his own heart.

“Very well. Duelists to the ready,” Dumbledore instructed. Harry flicked his wrist, and his holly and phoenix-feather wand shot into his waiting hand. He dropped into the dueling stance Daphne had taught him. Right foot forward, left back, knees bent, wand held at a slight upward angle, eyes fixed on his target. Malfoy favored a more classic, closed stance, his wand pointed down at the floor.

“Begin.”

At Dumbledore's command, Harry began his assault. "*Percutio! Reducto!*"

The Striking Curse was aimed at Draco's head, and it ricocheted off his hastily conjured shield. The Blasting Curse was aimed at his feet, and though Malfoy avoided getting hitting, the explosion blasted a hole in the floor of the ring and blew Malfoy back, off balance. "*Evanbero! Stupefy! Stupefy! Expelliarmus!*" Harry cast in quick succession.

Malfoy had no choice but to dodge, and he did. The Bludgeoning Curse clipped his leg anyway, spinning him around and leaving a nasty bruise, but the two Stunners and the Disarming Spell shot straight past and hit the jade-green barrier. Harry pressed the attack, hoping to tire Malfoy early, limit the number of spells he could get off. He fired another Striking Curse at Draco's head, then followed that up with a Burning Curse. At such a distance, the latter wasn't even close to hitting, but the blast of light had its intended effect, disorienting Malfoy and forcing him to hold his shield, so that the Striking Curse struck late enough to partially punch through his weakened defenses and knock him backwards into the shield wall. Harry took four strides in his direction while Draco tried to orient himself. He did, and finally got into the battle. A powerful Slicing Curse rebounded off Harry's shield, but the Cutting Curse that followed it got through, nicking Harry's left arm and drawing blood.

Harry winced in pain, and was delayed enough for Draco to cast his next spell. "*Coepio!*"

A bone-crushing Compression Curse lanced toward him, and this time it was he who had to dodge as the Dark curse slammed into the wall behind him. *Alright, cut the cute stuff. Malfoy certainly is.*

A split second before Malfoy blasted three more Slicing Curses, Harry loosed a pair of Stinging Hexes, sandwiched around a Blinding Curse. The first two curses hit each other in mid-flight, exploding in a spectacular and colorful fireball. The Blinding Curse hit Malfoy directly in the forehead, and the Stinging Hex hit his wand arm, causing him to howl in pain and nearly lose his wand just minutes into the battle. It

was the same series of spells he'd used to best Hermione at the dueling club.

The problem was that this time he wasn't able to take advantage of it. Draco had also used an Impediment Jinx without uttering an incantation, and so as soon as Harry had sent the Slicing Curses into the floor, he was knocked back hard, crashing to the floor painfully. He recovered as quickly as he could, but by then Draco had regained his sight and found his feet.

Stalemate. Again.

Draco moved to his right, and Harry countered by moving to his left. Now, the verbal taunting began. "Getting tired, Malfoy? Looks like that opening took a lot out of you."

Harry slapped aside a Disarming Spell.

"You wish, Potter. How's the shoulder?" Malfoy was indeed breathing heavily, but then again, so was Harry.

"Better than you're about to be. *Jacio! Stupefy! Evanbero!*"

Harry had just using three spells that worked in completely different ways, covered different target areas, and require different amounts of skill to block. Malfoy proved incapable of adjusting that fast. The last two spells missed, but only because Malfoy, trying to block all three at once, had already been lifted off his feet by the Flinging Hex and hammered into the shield wall. But again, he'd already silently retaliated.

The Bludgeoning Curse slammed into Harry's midsection, blasting through his partially-formed shield, and hurling him back with tremendous force. He hit the shield wall, bounced off, and slammed into the ground. He heard a horrific CRACK, and his left wrist exploded in agony. Fighting back tears, he somehow got to his feet, and angrily retaliated. He wanted to *hurt* Malfoy now, to make him feel the pain he currently felt. He charged forward, and launched two powerful Slicing Curses and two more Blasting Curses at his recovering opponent, screaming the incantations, allowing his magic to flow into the spells and supercharge them.

Malfoy was nearly decapitated by the first Slicing Curse, but the second missed altogether. The first Blasting curse blew a huge crater in the floor, blowing Malfoy back, and the second nearly blew a hole in the shield wall, sending sparks flying out over the front row of Ravenclaws. There was no whistle, meaning that his first Slicing curse had not disqualified him. He breathed a sigh of relief. He'd have to be more accurate. But Malfoy was still standing, and he was still hurting. He pulled back to fire a pair of Bludgeoning Curses, but Malfoy's Impediment Jinx knocked him off his feet. Malfoy advanced, a triumphant smile lighting his features, raising his wand for the finishing blow.

Harry could have gotten up easily, and deflected it. But at that moment, he took a chance, and decided to exploit Draco's arrogance. He rolled on the ground in pain, and Draco stopped moving forward and laughed.

It was a critical error. Harry rolled over, extended his wand arm out, and hit Malfoy directly in the face with a Striking Curse, the right wrist with a Bone-Breaking Hex, and the gut with a Flinging Hex.

Draco's nose shattered from the first impact, spewing blood everywhere. His wrist snapped from the second impact. And he was hurled back against the shield wall like a rag doll by the third, most powerful impact. He slammed into the wall, then into the floor, and lay there, moaning in agony, blood spurting from his destroyed nose.

Harry slowly got to his feet, tucking his left arm against his chest, pointed his wand at his fallen foe, and cast, "*Expelliarmus*."

Draco's Hawthorne wand soared free of his hand, and Harry easily caught it, sliding his own wand back into the holster. The shield wall dissolved, and he could now hear the roaring of the crowd, the cheers of encouragement and the insults thrown at him from all four Houses.

But Harry ignored them and strode toward Draco, who was struggling to sit up. His good hand slipped on the blood-soaked floor, and his broken arm hit the ground again, causing him to scream in pain.

Harry got down on one knee and looked him right in the eyes. "Come to gloat, Potter?" he gasped.

"No," Harry said. "But I *am* here to humiliate you. You see, Blaise told me you once confided to him that '*all the Mudbloods should be booted out of Hogwarts, and their wands snapped and thrown back in their crying faces. Especially Granger. I'd like to break hers personally, watch her sniveling all over Potter.*'"

Staring directly into Draco's widening, horrified eyes, Harry snapped the Hawthorne wand like a twig. Then he rose, and underhanded the pieces so that they clattered next to Malfoy's face, which was still pressed to the ground.

"Never hurt my friends again. If you do, I'll make what you're feeling now seem like a stomachache by comparison."

Then Harry turned, and walked slowly back across the ring.

As soon as he'd descended the steps, a red-tipped missile slammed into him, locking him in a fierce embrace. "Ouch...*Ginny!*" he gasped.

"Sorry," she said, backing off as she remembered his broken wrist.

He looked over and saw Hermione beaming at him. "That was *brilliant!*" she cried. "The way you fainted Malfoy, lying on the ground like that, then hit him with everything you had. It worked just like you said it would!"

"*Well done,*" Daphne said. His guardian beamed proudly at him, then ruffled his hair, the way she used to when he was much younger. He smiled at her, and then pointed to his wrist. "Of course," she said. She drew her wand, and with two movements healed both the wrist and the cut on his arm. Whole again, Harry allowed both of his friends to throw themselves at him. The exhilaration of victory flowed through him.

Already, Draco had been moved by his father from the ring, which was now sinking back into the ground. The House Tables had reappeared, and the students were now scattering as they landed back in their proper places. The shades were opened, and their lunch began appearing, courtesy of the House Elves. Dumbledore was trying to get everything back to normal as soon as possible.

Daphne had disappeared, presumably to lift her Vow of Vengeance. Hermione grabbed him again, and squeezed him for dear life this time. When she finally let go, he asked, "What was that for?"

"I heard what you said, we all did. Thank you for being my friend, Harry." Hermione's voice was choked up, and tears glistened in her eyes.

"You're welcome," Harry replied, still gasping for air.

"Now sit down, and eat something. C'mon Hermione," Ginny said, pointing firmly at the Slytherin table while keeping her eyes locked on Harry, the tone of her voice indicating that she was taking charge, and wasn't going to take 'no' for an answer. The three friends made their way over, and Harry was met with a mixture of approval, measured interest, and a few hissed expletives. He didn't care. Sitting down next to Ginny, and pulling his girlfriend in close, he wasn't sure he'd felt better in his entire life.

A/N: So, is Harry still a coward? Was his message to Draco not clear enough?

I'm sorry, but one of the most frustrating things I've experienced since I started writing this story is the people writing reviews and messages saying that they've lost respect for Harry because he didn't immediately defend his friend. Somehow, the fact that Harry is a Slytherin, and not a Gryffindor, has yet to sink in. He put a ton of thought into his revenge, and it was as sweet as ever. He managed to force Draco to accept a challenge to a duel before the entire student body. He avenged Hermione and completely and utterly humiliated his rival. Better than him just wasting Malfoy with a Bludgeoning Curse, and getting in huge trouble? I think so.

Harry is simply different than his canon incarnation. He's more calculating and patient. It doesn't mean he's a coward.

Again, you see how the relationship between Harry and Daphne has changed since she nearly destroyed his mind in the Chamber. While still very close, and fanatically loyal to each other, they aren't as physically affectionate, and Daphne acts more like a mentor than a

mother. That was the point of the entire Chamber experience. I wanted to shake up the relationship between Harry and Daphne, change their roles a bit. I try not to torture the characters for no reason.

Harry is becoming something that some of you might not be all that comfortable with. It's beyond Slytherin and Gryffindor. In becoming a war leader, he's going to become somewhat calloused to death, and show a willingness to sacrifice the lives of others for the greater goal. That's what a general is asked to do. He knows that all of his men aren't going to come home in each battle. He's been slowly maturing as the series has gone along. He was just trying to survive in PS, somewhat abnoxious and immature in SH (as well as being terrified by what was happening to him), beginning to accept and plan for what he needed to do in SoD (as well as very angry), and he's fully accepted what needs to be done at this point in this book. He's only going to become more distant, more cold from here. Especially given the losses he's going to suffer.

I've revised the death toll for DR, upping it to six. Bertha Jorkins was an add-on. I wanted to bring back the dreams. They play an important role in canon. The question is that, since Harry is more willing to learn Occlumency and less overtly hateful of Snape (he respects him as a wizard, though he thinks he's a perfectly dreadful human being), will he be more able to cope with the visions. Voldemort is testing Harry right now. He wants to know what he can stomach, how he'll react, if he'll crumble under pressure. Crouch's mission is a bit different this time around.

McGonagall is one of my favorite characters, and in many ways, she's the voice of sanity in this situation. She cares about Harry, and she's horrified by what he's becoming, and what Daphne is making him into. She feels Daphne is being irresponsible in allowing Harry to force a duel. She's probably right. McGonagall is an extremely strong character, a powerful and interesting witch, a Transfiguration master, and Dumbledore's de facto second-in-command.

I think I'm writing a believable relationship between Harry and Ginny. It's one that will sort of stay in the background the whole series. Harry doesn't have time to be a regular teenager, not with everything he

has to deal with. It's a needed distraction, yet it's more than that. But, keep in mind that there is still a massive time-bomb in that relationship: Daphne.

Blaise is a character that I really want to get involved in this story. I started with this chapter, portraying him as trustworthy (again), and a person that legitimately cares about Harry as a person. That said, Hermione isn't going to accept him with open arms. That will be dealt with later.

So, next up is the Second Task. It's also an opportunity for another less-used character to shine. It's a pretty intense chapter, and the ending is pretty dramatic. I'm very happy with the way it turned out. Once my beta gets through it, you'll get a chance to see what I mean.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter 18: Deadly Waters

Harry's euphoria from his triumph over Draco Malfoy lasted over a week, undimmed by Dumbledore's announcement that the Ministry had officially excluded underage witches and wizards from the Charter of Dueling. That was, of course, to say that Dumbledore and a collection of concerned Light wizards had crammed the new law down Minister Fudge's throat, over the objection of Dark families everywhere.

The only thing that could dim his enthusiasm was the realization that he was running out of time to solve the Egg Clue, as it was already late January, and homework, combined with Occlumency and Potions lessons with Snape, was leaving him less and less time to research. And despite Hermione's endless efforts, and a few keen insights by Ginny, he was no closer to finding the answer. He was about to give up yet again, when he received help from the most unlikely of sources.

"Hey, Harry!"

Turning around, Harry found himself staring into the widened eyes of Neville Longbottom, who looked shocked by his own daring. Hermione and Ginny, a few shelves away, had also looked in Neville's direction. Ginny suddenly turned bright red. "Oh, sorry Neville," she squeaked. "Harry, I ran some of my ideas about the Egg clue past Neville on the train and he said he might have something, but then I forgot with everything that's happened recently. Merlin, Neville, I'm so sorry for just forgetting you like that."

"It's okay," Neville said. Ginny was getting close to hyperventilating. "Anyway, I thought I'd see if I can be of any help. It's probably not what you're looking for, but I figured..."

"Just go ahead, Neville," Harry coaxed.

"Alright," the pudgy Gryffindor said. "Harry, I just...I remember something Gran said about the ugliest thing she'd ever heard. She said..." Neville took a deep breath. "She said that one day, while she was just a young Gryffindor at Hogwarts, the Merpeople were staging some sort of ceremony. Headmaster Dippet was there, along with a

number of teachers. Anyway, this rather nice-looking Merwoman came to the surface, and she started singing..."

Hermione's mouth dropped wide open, and she looked like she could have kicked herself.

"...it was rather awful, really. Says it sounded like nails on a chalkboard, or a Banshee mating cry, or something dreadful like that..."

"Neville, you're a *genius!*" Hermione cried. She ran up to him and captured her stunned housemate in a hug. "Thank you, thank you!" With that, she was gone, dashing for another part of the library.

Ginny and Harry looked at each other. Then Harry put it together. "Bloody hell," he breathed. "Talk about missing the obvious."

Hermione was back a minute later, panting from exertion. She slammed a large book down on the reading table, and frantically flipped through it until she found the page she was looking for. She pointed at a passage with her wand. "Here, right here."

Harry leaned over and read.

Among the most foul sounds of the magical world is the song of the merpeople, although even this is a matter of perspective. As unbearable as their song is above water, to us air breathers, below the surface, the song is as beautiful as the music of the greatest human composers.

Harry grinned. "Water is the answer," he repeated. "She was right."

"Wait, didn't Luna say that at the Yule Ball?" Neville asked. Harry nodded.

"If you have to listen to the mersong to understand the clue, that probably means you'll be spending some time underwater," Ginny pointed out.

"I'd like to check that to be sure, but you are probably right," Harry agreed.

"I might have something for that too."

Harry stared at him in wonderment, something that clearly seemed to confuse the anxious Gryffindor. "Go on," he said, again encouraging him to continue.

"Well, you see, Professor Moody gave me this book after the lesson with the Unforgivable Curses...trying to make me feel better, I reckon."

Harry remembered that. Neville had been badly shaken after witnessing a demonstration of the Cruciatus Curse, which had undoubtedly brought back terrifying memories of his past. Neville had been just days older than Harry when Voldemort murdered his parents, but Harry knew that if he still lived that night in his nightmares, the same was surely true of the boy before him.

"...anyway, the book's called *Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean*. I was reading through it at Gran's, and I came across this passage on Gillyweed. It's this magical weed that only grows in shallow water near Malta...and I think I read that it allows the user to-

"To breathe underwater!" Hermione exclaimed. "Neville, where have you *been* this whole time?"

Neville failed to realize she was joking. "I'm sorry, Hermione, but I didn't know-"

"Relax," Harry said, grinning broadly at him. "You know, I might just kiss you right now."

"Something that might make your girlfriend a wee bit jealous," Ginny said from behind him. "Of course, I *might* forgive you."

Neville chuckled weakly, once he realized that Harry wasn't serious...well, probably...

"I think I remember some other details about the plant," Neville continued, sounding considerably more confident now than he normally did, and now that he was in his element. "When consumed,

Gillyweed causes the consumer to develop gills, as well as webbing between the fingers and toes.”

“Excellent,” Harry said. “Alright, let’s go figure out the details before we get any more excited. Ginny and I’ll go get the Egg, you two meet us down at the Lake-”

“Harry, the water is frigid. Getting hypothermia on top of everything else isn’t going to help,” Hermione said.

“I’m going to have to do it in less than a month anyway,” Harry argued. “I can just use a Warming Charm to make a patch of the shallow water more tolerable. Besides, it’s not like there’s anywhere else I can fit the Egg and my head underwater...”

“Well,” Hermione said, sounding reluctant to admit it, “There is the prefect’s bathroom. I know the password.”

“You do?” Harry said, surprised.

“Looks like our Hermione’s a little less innocent than she’d like to have everyone believe,” Ginny said. She’d moved to Harry’s side.

“Well, I just *happened* to overhear Cedric and Richard Price, one of the Ravenclaw prefects, talking about it,” Hermione explained. “I remembered it because I thought it might come in handy. Turns out I was right.”

“You’re still advising we break the rules,” Ginny said, cackling evilly.

“You needn’t be so dramatic about it,” Hermione said, glaring at her friend. “While I don’t advocate breaking rules just for the sake of it, figuring out what Harry’s up against is certainly a noble goal.”

“Whatever you say,” Ginny said, shrugging. “Fred and George will be pleased.”

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“If you two are quite finished, we should get going. You meet us at the Prefect’s bathroom,” Harry said, indicating Hermione and Neville.

Neville looked stunned to be included. "Me?"

"Of course," Hermione said. "It's your idea, after all. We'd be glad to have you come along."

"I'd say we be rather disappointed if you didn't," Ginny added.

Neville's smile was one of relief and the joy that came with finally being accepted by his peers. He and Hermione took off for the Fifth Floor, Ginny and Harry raced for the dungeons.

Ginny retrieved the egg while Harry changed into swimming trunks and a t-shirt to wear beneath his robes. They managed to avoid any suspicion and, when they reached the door to the Prefect's bathroom, they found a perfect imitation of one of Filch's Out of Order signs, complete with identical hand writing. Harry pulled the handle, but it was locked. He was beginning to wonder if the sign was *real*, and not an imitation when the door opened a crack and Neville's eye peered out at them. They stepped back to allow the Gryffindor to open the door further, then slipped inside.

Hermione had already filled the tub when they arrived. Harry nodded and began stripping off his robes. Harry noticed that in an ironic twist there was a painting of a Merwoman (looking considerably more human than they actually were.) He also noticed Hermione's eyes bulging as he undid his belt.

"*Should I look away?*" Hermione asked, sounding vaguely disgusted.

"Relax, he's wearing something underneath...*unfortunately*," Ginny whispered, so that only Harry could hear. Cheeks burning a bit, Harry took off the rest of his school robe, handed it to Hermione, and then stepped into the warm water. He reached out and Ginny handed him the egg. Then, he ducked his head underwater, opening the egg as he did so.

Through the clear bathwater, he could see that the egg was emitting a bright light that hadn't been there when he tried to open it in his dormitory. A beautiful hum came from the glowing interior, followed by a series of notes from some sort of instrument. Then, the song began...

Come seek us where our voices sound,
We cannot sing above the ground,
And while you're searching, ponder this:
We've taken what you'll sorely miss,
An hour long you'll have to look,
And to recover what we took,
But past an hour - the prospect's black
Too late, it's gone, it won't come back.

Another few bars of music, played by the song unknown instrument, came from the egg.

An hour long you'll have to look,
And to recover what we took...,
... your time's half-gone, so tarry not
Lest what you seek stays here to rot...

His lungs burning for oxygen, Harry closed the egg, went to the surface for air, and then ducked back down. He listened to the song again, trying to memorize it as best he could. He came up again, standing in the bath water. The others looked at him anxiously. Harry repeated the words he'd just heard.

"So, if I understand correctly, it seems as though something valuable is going to be taken from you, and hidden at the bottom of the lake. You'll have just one hour to find it and bring it back," Hermione said.

"Sounds about right," Harry agreed, stepping out of the bath. Ginny handed him a towel. "What do you reckon they are planning to take? Don't have a broom anymore."

"It's probably a person," Ginny said. Then, more subdued, she continued. "Most likely me or Hermione." She looked unhappy, slightly anxious. "My guess is that it's me."

"How exactly are you going to end up on the bottom of the lake?" Harry asked. "I certainly can't see you going willingly."

"I'm sure that everyone will be perfectly safe," Hermione said. "Dumbledore wouldn't let anything happen..."

"Because the bloody dragons were so harmless," Harry groaned. Hermione glared at him.

"...as I was saying," she continued, "while the Champions might be in danger, I doubt he'd let a student just run out of air and drown at the bottom of the lake if any of the Champions couldn't reach them."

"Hermione's probably right," Neville agreed. Again, he seemed to be stunned that he was even attempting to participate in this conversation. Harry gave him a nod of encouragement, and he seemed to relax.

"Yeah, I think so too," Harry said. "Well, we've got a basic plan. Might be good to know what I should expect down there, and we're going to need to procure some Gillyweed, but at least we've finally what were doing." He grinned at Neville. "Thanks to you, of course."

"You're welcome," Neville replied.

"You know, you really ought to feel more comfortable spending time with us," Harry told him.

"Well, I never really got the idea that you wanted me around...not that you haven't been really kind to me and all, you have...I just...I didn't really think..."

"No, you didn't," Ginny said. But she was still smiling. "I like having you around, Neville. We all do. If you're looking for somebody to talk to, don't feel shy about tracking us down, okay?"

"Alright...thanks," Neville replied, his cheeks reddening a bit. "Thanks a lot. I really ought to be going, though. I promised Professor Sprout I'd help her re-pot some Mandrakes. She'll be expecting me."

"Thanks for your help, Neville," Hermione said.

Neville waved shyly, then slipped out. Hermione dried Harry off with a couple of waves of her wand, and he donned his robes.

"You think he'll actually seek us out next time?" Ginny asked.

Harry shrugged. "I hope he does, but I honestly don't know. Come on, let's get to dinner, I'm starved."

Hermione drained the bath, and they slipped out, taking the sign on the door with them.

What they didn't see was Moaning Myrtle, floating up in a corner of the large room, rather disappointed at just how much of Harry Potter she *hadn't* seen.

"Legilimens!"

Snape's mental presence instantly penetrated Harry's defenses. He managed to see about three or four flashes of memory before being pushed back. He tried multiple other memories, but was stymied by the mental equivalent of a hastily-erected brick wall every time. Finally, he slammed into one of the walls head on, smashing through, and penetrated deeper.

Harry slowly lowered his head, bending down to touch Ginny Weasley's lips with his own...

Harry regrouped and hurled Snape back, ejecting him from his mind entirely. He opened his eyes, breathing heavily, and looked to his Head of House for an assessment. "Professor?"

"I was able to reach one of your more private memories," Snape said. "It is possible that even from so brief an exposure, the Dark Lord may be able to glean some sensitive information. And you must remember, Potter, that this is the best you've managed while fully conscious and forewarned of my mental attack."

"I know I'm not all the way there, sir," Harry said. Learning the basics had not been much of a problem, but making progress from there had become steadily more difficult. Earlier, Snape had been able to exploit his darkest memories, using his visceral emotional reaction to defeat his attempts to push him out; using the horrors of his past to shatter his mental control. Harry had gotten much better at limiting the amount of time Snape had before he counter-attacked, as well as

making it far more difficult for him to break through Harry's defenses in the first place.

"Nonetheless, you have made significant progress," Snape granted. "Considering the number of weapons the Dark Lord would have to overwhelm and torment you, I must say I'm pleasantly surprised with your aptitude for the art of Occlumency."

"That means a lot, coming from you, Professor" Harry said. A part of him still felt revulsion when he looked at his Potions Professor. The memory he'd witnessed forced him to keep an emotion distance, at best. At worst, it made him automatically assume the worst of the man, and find it difficult to deal with his criticism.

"Indeed, Potter. I rarely give compliments. In this case, it is deserved. I often wonder how I could have ever been foolish enough to believe that you were in any way like your father. The two of you may be physically alike, but the resemblance ends there. You are fine student, Potter, dedicated and focused."

"Hasn't helped me recently with the Potions lessons," Harry said. He'd already found himself unable to duplicate Moon's efforts with the most advanced Potions. Moon seemed to have a sixth sense that told her exactly when to add an ingredient, or to adjust the temperature by just a few degrees centigrade one way or the other. Harry was quite adept at following instructions to the letter, but while he had a basic feel for subtle changes and could often detect if something was going wrong, that was the limit to his abilities. Harry would most likely be a fine Potions student, but he probably didn't have a future as a Potions' Master.

"You *do* seemed to have reached your limits," Snape admitted. "I must admit I *did* have high hopes for you. Moon comes from a family of Potions Masters and Mistresses, so her success was in no way surprising. Considering the ineptitude of your father, yours was."

"Professor, wasn't my mother quite good at Potions?" Harry asked.

Snape looked at him, then proceeded cautiously. "Your mother was...quite good at everything, Potter. Lily Evans was one of the best

students at Hogwarts. If there is a comparison, simply in terms of academic aptitude, it would be your friend, Granger."

Harry had expected that. "But even Hermione isn't as advanced as I am, sir."

"No, she isn't," Snape said. "Based on what I've seen of her, Potions is one subject where she didn't immediately have success. Hence, she lacks the confidence and flair of an advanced Potions student. Her marks are fine, and her essays are excellent, but she underperforms on the practical side. You are very much the opposite. That's not to say your theoretical work is poor; it's perfectly acceptable. But your attention to detail and basic instincts for Potions has allowed you to come as far as you have. I propose that you continue to work with Moon and me outside of class, but that unless you make considerable progress, you return to the normal track next year."

"What about advancing me, sir?" Harry asked.

"To N.E.W.T Potions?" Snape asked, raising an eyebrow. "That would be quite a challenge, Potter. The difference between 5th year Potions and N.E.W.T Potions is significant. I'm not sure you are ready to handle that kind of work. I can at least promise to make sure that you are challenged next year, although we may be working on some potions that you've already mastered."

"I'd appreciate that, sir."

"Yes...*Legilimens!*"

This time, Snape caught Harry completely off guard. Memories flashed by, including dozens of tender moments with Ginny...the Chamber of Secrets...the underground room with the Philosopher's Stone...Harry watched as Hermione's belly was ripped open by Quirrell's curse...then pushed back, shoving Snape out of that corner of his mind...Snape tried another avenue, and got a glimpse of Harry staring down Fenrir Grey back in the Forbidden Forest but Harry blocked him there...his attempt to break into some of his younger memories with Daphne was stymied at last by Harry...as Snape regrouped, Harry took to the offensive, allowing his magic to boost his

abilities, to pummel Snape with mental blows, until he was finally ejected...

Harry's eyes snapped open. He was pressed against the wall, sweaty and exhausted. His lungs gasped for air.

Snape's expression was one of disappointment and distaste. Harry decided to say it before he did. "Damn."

"Indeed, Mr. Potter? Do you know what went wrong?" he asked. He was clearly testing Harry's appreciation of the severity of the situation. If he in any way blamed Snape, he would fail that test.

"I let myself be pulled in by our conversations, by the closeness between us. I lost control of my emotions, let my control slip. And you took advantage of that."

"Yes. Do you feel that my actions were in any way unfair? In the way that I attacked you? In the memories that I focused on?"

"No," Harry said truthfully. "Your mandate is to teach me how to resist Vol...the Dark Lord's mental attacks. He won't tell me when he's going to strike. I might not even have the warning given by the Legilimens incantation. I need to remain alert and prepared at all times. An attack might come when I least expect it."

"Yes," Snape said. "That is exactly what I wanted to hear. You have accepted the blame for your own mistakes. An uncommon quality, yet one I prize. Life is not fair, Potter. That you seemed to have realized that at your age bodes well for your future."

Harry didn't mention he felt Snape was a bit of a hypocrite. Although he never specifically blamed James Potter and the other Marauders for driving him to Voldemort's side, somehow it was still implied. "Thank you, sir."

"So, tell me, Potter, have you made any more progress in your preparations for the Second Task? I wouldn't want Slytherin House to be bested by a couple of foreigners...or a *Hufflepuff*."

“Of course, Professor,” Harry said. He concealed his disdain for Snape’s arrogance. “I’ve figured out the significance of the Golden Egg, and I’m formulating a plan for the Second Task.”

“Excellent...*Legilimens!*”

Harry had been waiting for that moment, and threw up a shield immediately. Snape’s presence slammed into it, and the impact reverberated in his mind like a gong. Snape was physically knocked backwards as well, stumbling into the front of his desk. “Good anticipation...*Legilimens!*”

Again Harry was ready, and again, Snape was repulsed. Harry stared back at him, prepared for a third attack. “Obviously, when expecting an attack, your skills are quite impressive. It’s the ability to remain focused and ready to protect your thoughts at a moment’s notice that separates the mediocre Occlumens from the advanced Occlumens. We are done for tonight. Continue to practice every night before bed. If you begin having nightmares, especially ones not caused by the Dark Lord, you aren’t clearing your mind correctly, and you will be vulnerable.”

“I understand,” Harry said.

“I can’t say I enjoy working with you, Potter, but your politeness, despite the fact I am intentionally trying to exploit your worst memories, is refreshing. I’ll see again next Wednesday evening.”

Harry nodded, and Snape unlocked the door to his office. His mind spinning a bit, he headed off in search of Ginny. She was probably waiting for him in the Slytherin Common Room.

When he entered, a number of eyes instantly looked his way. His defeat of Malfoy had won him some admirers, especially among the younger Slytherins, but he’d also earned respect from a few of his older classmates. Millicent Bulstrode had acknowledged his existence for the first time in about two years. He didn’t know much about the Bullstrodes; they weren’t really a wealthy or well-known Dark family.

Also giving him a curious look was the dark-haired Giselle Reisor, sitting alone in a corner of the Common Room. She had not been

embraced by her peers, but she'd also shown little interest in becoming friends with any of the others. She tended to avoid almost all contact, but Harry often spotted her watching others, in a manner even more overt than that of Theodore Nott, who might have been the only person in the room that didn't look his way.

As he'd expected, Ginny was sitting on one of the couches, reading, and she smiled when she caught sight of him. "Lessons go alright?" she asked.

Harry nodded, and sat down next to her. A quick glare chased off a few of the Second Year Slytherin girls who were peering at them intently. Harry reached around Ginny's back and pulled her closer to him. She sighed, relaxing as she leaned her head against his shoulder, closing her eyes, content. Somehow, just having her there was all the comfort that he needed. He'd originally thought that a relationship between him and Ginny might be a distraction he didn't need, however pleasant. Now, he understood that far from being a distraction, she was keeping him grounded in reality, giving him the breaks he needed every so often, but also keeping him focused and determined. He'd never be able to thank her enough for convincing him to take this chance.

Maybe, sometime in the future, his fears about the consequences of such a relationship might be realized. But for now, there were no regrets.

Harry stared out over the lake, knowing that soon, perhaps even before the ice in the shallow water melted, he'd be plunging headlong beneath the surface and swimming down maybe fifty meters to rescue the girl that was currently skipping stones over the surface of the frigid lake, using her wand to create beautiful patterns of splashes. Ginny had discovered the relaxing benefits of this particular activity during her first year at Hogwarts, but she'd invited him along this time. Regardless, he was keeping his distance, giving her the space she needed.

Daphne had assured him that Gillyweed wasn't impossible to procure; it would probably be available at the Potions supply store in

town, although it wouldn't be cheap. He could get it during their next visit to Hogsmeade.

He heard something behind him, and spun around. He frowned when he saw Minerva McGonagall, dressed in bulky fur robes of black fur, coming down the path toward him. "Professor..? What are you doing here?" he asked, although he had more than an inkling as to the reason for her visit.

"I heard that you were down here, and thought we might talk," McGonagall said. "You've certainly been making quite a name for yourself, Harry. Why, you've even managed to have Rita Skeeter write an article about you that wasn't full of untrue and unsubstantiated allegations. You came off quite well in it, if I do say so myself."

Rita Skeeter had finally called his earlier promise to give her an exclusive interview a few days after the duel. After destroying several of her Quik-Quotes quills, and threatening her with the exposure of her status as an illegal animagus if she misquoted or corrupted the spirit in which anything was said, she'd gotten her exclusive interview, and Harry had gotten some positive press. She'd played up the "underdog" angle, but used the duel to make him seem like more of a bulldog, one willing to defend himself and his friends from anyone that might threaten them. She might as well have been tasked with writing an advertisement of Harry to the wizarding public. Skeeter might have gotten a few raised eyebrows, but her reputation of a glorified gossip columnist was undamaged, because she was able to incorporate all kinds of dirt on the Malfoy family, and play up the sympathy angle with Harry.

"Regardless, I was hoping to get a chance to speak with you alone," she continued.

At that moment, Ginny made her presence felt, as she came to his side. "Hello Professor."

"Ah, Miss Weasley...I'm afraid I didn't see you down there."

"I *can* be easy to miss," Ginny said, clearly suspicious.

"What was it that you wanted to talk about, Professor?" Harry asked. His breath was visible in the cold air, but he wasn't in the least tempted to ask that they bring the conversation inside. His upbringing in Canada had given him more than a little experience with cold weather.

McGonagall looked anxiously at Ginny, as if wishing she'd just go away. That hope dashed, she pressed on. "I want to talk you about some concerns that I've had about you...and your guardian."

"What kind of concerns?" Ginny asked. McGonagall looked irritated.

"I was addressing Mr. Potter, Miss Weasley," she told the redhead.

"Then I'll ask the same question," Harry said. "What kind of concerns do you have?"

"I was very close to your father, Harry. James was, for all his faults, and I know he had many of them when he was your age, one of my favorite pupils," McGonagall said.

"I'm not my father," Harry replied. "I'm not anything like him. I'm *Slytherin*."

"That you are not part of my House does not have any importance to this conversation, Harry," she said, using his given name again, trying to establish a closeness and convince him to open up. "My point was that I cared greatly about your father, and I was also close to your mother. And as the only son of two people that held such special places in my heart, that affection has been carried over to you."

"I appreciate that, Professor, I really do," Harry said. "I don't quite understand where you are going, however."

"You are growing up too quickly, Harry. Your everyday thoughts are not those that should be floating around the mind of a fourteen-year old. This is one of the few times I've ever seen you where you were not working, reading, or discussing heavy matters," McGonagall continued.

"As much as I am touched by your concern, I don't really see the problem," Harry said. "I have responsibilities and duties that aren't typical of a boy of my age. My behavior, thoughts, and habits are all a reflection of that."

"Perhaps, Harry, but I must argue that you might be exaggerating what is expected of you."

"Really, Professor?" Harry said. His message was clear: *get to the point*.

"I think that Daphne has been encouraging you to grow up faster than you should," she finally said. "I feel that she has been treating you as if you are her protégé rather than her ward. She's turning you into a soldier, Harry. The duel between you and Draco, and her encouragement of your actions is merely symptomatic of that. She isn't well, Harry."

"Daphne is *fine*," Harry growled, clearly defensive.

"I fear that you are mistaken. The things that she has experienced in her life; the brutal slaughter of her family, or her husband...the loss of her best friends, and countless comrades in arms...she is broken, Harry. While she has done an admirable job of pretending otherwise, she simply isn't whole. She needs help."

"So you are suggesting that my guardian be *institutionalized*?" Harry asked, getting angrier by the moment. "Are you suggesting she be relegated to the Permanent Ward, with Neville Longbottom's insane parents?"

He'd been trying to get McGonagall as angry as he was, and he'd succeeded, especially with the comment about Alice and Frank Longbottom. Harry still couldn't actually believe what he was hearing. McGonagall had become too sentimental, or else had been kept in the dark by Dumbledore. Harry had a job to do, and if his childhood had to pay the price for it, then that was the way things were. "I am suggesting *nothing* of the sort!" McGonagall cried. "And you'd best show more *respect*..."

“*Respect?! For you? For the Longbottoms? What are you going to do, give me a detention? You come up here, interrupting a private moment between me and my girlfriend, and tell me that I’ve been raised badly, that I’m screwed up, and that the woman who’s given me everything in the world I ever needed, and asked for nothing in return, is the cause of it!*” Harry was panting by the end of his rant. Ginny squeezed his hand tightly, and he looked at her. Her face was strangely conflicted, but when it seemed she was about to say something, she shook her head almost imperceptibly, and remained silent.

“*Well...*” McGonagall huffed. “I am sorry for offending you, Mr. Potter. And perhaps I got a little carried away. But I *urge* you to consider what I have said.”

“I’ll do that,” Harry said. “Just don’t expect me to take it that seriously.”

McGonagall glared at him, but seemed to be resigned to her failure. She turned and headed back up to the castle.

“Hermione would be mortified, you know?” Ginny said, a few minutes after the Gryffindor Head of House had left.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I didn’t *mean* to be so rude, I just...I mean, I *know* that Daphne isn’t always in her right mind. But that’s a far thing from saying she’s unstable and isn’t fit to raise me. *You* understand what I have to do, understand that she’s acting in my best interests, right?”

There was only a slight hesitation, one that Harry chose to ignore, instead of considering the consequences. “Of course,” Ginny said, her voice confident enough to sooth his fears. “She’s wrong.”

Harry nodded. “She doesn’t *understand*, Ginny. She doesn’t understand the Purebloods I need to ally with, the respect I need to earn, the training I need to become capable of taking on Voldemort’s finest, and eventually the man himself. She’s like Cedric was, lulled into a false sense of security, clinging to the lie that Voldemort met his end at Godric’s Hollow, that the wizarding world was safe again.”

Ginny quickly nodded her agreement. "You *were* a little rude, though. You've got to understand, Harry, that for people that aren't like me, people that don't know the entire story, your behavior can be concerning. To them, you're some misguided boy trying to play hero long before he's ready."

"I guess that makes sense," Harry said. "Best not to dwell on it, though. They'll see the trust soon enough. They'll realize that they were wrong about me, and wrong about Daphne..."

"Right," Ginny said. She leaned against him. Then, she turned around, and stared hard into his eyes. Harry reached down and cupped her cheek with his right hand, reaching around to caress her hair with the other. He lowered his lips to hers, and they kissed. They kissed with more passion, and more feeling than they ever had before. Harry's fears and concerns were swept away for that moment. When they finally broke it, they gazed upon each other in wonderment.

"This is the part when I wonder what I did to deserve you," Harry half-joked.

"All you needed to do was be yourself," she said softly, not joking in the least. "Want to go inside?"

"Love to," he replied.

Hand-in-hand, they made their way back from the water's edge to the warmth of the castle.

Transfiguration with Professor McGonagall was ordinarily the highlight of Hermione Jane Granger's day. Normally, she was engrossed by the material, challenged by the complexity of the magic, and, of course, the best student in the class.

But today was different. Because today, she couldn't stop staring at her best friend, who was sitting one row ahead and one to the side of her, reading the assigned passage. Normally, they sat together, but Harry had barely gotten into the class on time, his near-tardiness the product of reasons unexplained, several minutes after Hermione had taken her seat and pulled out her writing materials and textbook.

When she thought about it, she considered the possibility of Harry being delayed for *Ginny Weasley-related* reasons to be quite plausible.

Hermione was happy for them. That she had determined without much conscious thought. They were happy together, and the relationship seemed to allow both of them to relax a bit, and give them a brief respite from the serious matters that consumed their lives. She *wasn't* jealous...

Well, *maybe* she was...she couldn't help but feeling left out once in a while, but there was hardly anything to be done about it. Harry and Ginny were together now, and they needed some time alone. On Valentine's Day, earlier that month, she'd spent the entire visit in the bookstore while Harry and Ginny enjoyed what was technically their first date as a couple. They still spent the majority of their free time with her, working together in the library, researching the creatures Harry would have to face in the lake, training whenever possible in the Room of Requirement...occasionally, Neville would even come by, asking questions and, once in a while, opening up and telling them a bit about himself...

She had no *right* to be resentful. She had no *right* to blame them for leaving her alone for an hour, maybe two, at a time. And she *knew* that Harry and Ginny were not oblivious to her feelings. They seemed extra polite at times, asking her how she was even when they spent so much time with her that they already knew the answer. They listened to her problems, and she listened to theirs. They were still, in every respect, her best friends in the entire world.

But if she *really* believed that, why did she couldn't she keep from arguing with herself over the matter? Why couldn't she just accept that now that Harry and Ginny were involved, things wouldn't always be the same. It wasn't as though she didn't have experience being on her own. She'd been equal parts ignored and ridiculed at her Muggle school for her bookishness and her strict adherence to the rules. She'd been a loner. She'd learned to live with it. When she'd finally become friends with Harry (*after* he nearly got killed saving her life from a murderous troll), it had improved the quality of her life significantly, even if being unceasingly loyal to the Boy-Who-Lived

meant that she'd never be able to live a peaceful existence as a normal teenage witch. Of course, if Harry was right, and he almost certainly was, none of them would have the option of being *normal*, whether they wanted to be or not.

Just as Harry had been her first ever real friend, Ginny had been her first female friend...meaning that she finally had someone her age that could understand and occasionally discuss certain things that Harry was decidedly not comfortable discussing. The fact that she'd seemed to read Harry like a book from the second that she finally accepted her placement in Slytherin (although she was often too shy to say anything, and she guessed that Harry scarcely noticed), was also a positive. Still, Ginny would stick with her when she was right. Of course, the one time that Ginny had been forced to choose between Harry and Hermione, the Gryffindor had to admit that she had been a little *wrong*. Harry might have been rushing into it, but she now understood that what seemed like out-of-control ambition had actually been an awareness of what needed to be done...as uncomfortable as she'd been with it at the time.

Looking back on it, she'd been afraid. Not that she wasn't still afraid...afraid that she might lose the only two people other than her parents that had bothered to *try* to understand her, afraid that the magical world, which she had welcomed into her life with open arms, might be forever changed and scarred by war, and afraid that in leaving the Muggle world, she might merely have stumbled upon something far worse.

That fear was irrational, she knew. Her entering into the magical world had nothing to do with the coming Darkness, and she would never for a single moment consider the possibility of letting Harry fight this war without her. Nor would she sacrifice the friendships, knowledge, and trust she had gained because her safety might be endangered. It sounded foolish...well, it sounded like *Harry*...but she had a sense that she'd been *born* to fight this war, that her entire life had been leading to a moment far in the future, when she stood side-by-side-by side with Harry and Ginny, ready to strike down the onrushing Darkness...

Now she was frightened herself.

Could that *really* be true? Could she, a thinking, reasoning, living, fifteen-year old human being, actually have been brought into this world for no reason other than to fight in a war? What sort of *existence* was *that*? She didn't believe in a God; her parents were atheists, and God and religion had no meaning in the magical world...but if she *had*, what sort of a monster would that God have to be?

That her parents knew nothing of any of what was troubling her now was both a blessing and a curse. They couldn't understand, as she'd told Harry. She *wasn't* an average Muggle teenager, even an extremely bright Muggle teenager...she was a skilled *witch*, a witch with a destiny that she couldn't herself understand, but that she knew existed nonetheless.

For a person that once professed not to believe in Fate, Granger, you've changed more than you could have ever imagined.

That thought demanded an explanation.

Well, I've seen and experienced more horrific things than most people twice my age...That can change a girl...

So could the realization that her life, no matter what she tried to make of it, had already been decided.

But then again, she asked herself, does the fact that I am destined to fight a war mean that I should devote my life to nothing else?

A pause. An image. A memory.

You bloody idiot, Granger.

Harry. Ginny. Harry *and* Ginny. That they'd begun a relationship had no bearing on the outcome of the war! They'd done it because they *wanted* to! They'd chosen to be together, to possibly risk their friendship if things were to end badly, because they wanted more...Maybe they were all going to have to fight, and maybe, they were all going to have to die...but that didn't mean they couldn't chose the path that took them to that end.

“...Miss Granger?” a sharp, somewhat surprised voice snapped her out of her mental epiphany.

“Y-yes,” Hermione replied, sitting up, folding her hands on her desk, and looking up attentively.

“Answer the question, please.

Question? What question? Bloody hell, that'll teach me to drift off during class...

“Could you repeat the question, Professor?” Hermione asked, in the most polite and innocent voice she could manage. Harry turned around and stared at her as if there was a third arm growing out of her forehead.

“Very well,” McGonagall said. “Miss Granger, could you please recite to the class the details of your essay about the difference between changing the material an object is comprised of, and changing the shape and size of the object.”

Hermione had no idea why the Professor was asking her to do this. She quickly recalled her arguments, and summarized them. “Well, magic, the force that allows us to perform any form of Transfiguration, exists essentially without limits. However, witches and wizards are limited in their ability to manipulate and channel magic, in the form of spells and other enchantments...my point was that changing the material something is made from is relatively simple for a trained witch or wizard because it merely involves changing the composition of a static, already-existing object. However, to change size and shape, one needs to literally *create* matter that wasn't there before, or take it away. That requires much more magic, a great deal more concentration, and makes Transfiguration one of the hardest magical arts to master. In addition, while most advanced Transfiguration students can change smaller objects, the bigger the object, the more power *and* finesse is required to change it.” She looked anxiously at her Professor. She was also short of breath. She'd paused a few times, but been so nervous that she'd just kept going.

“Well put, Miss Granger. Ten points to Gryffindor.” She turned to the rest of the class. “If I see any of you mocking another student again,

I'll assign detentions and deduct twenty points for each defense. The reason I asked Miss Granger to say that, instead of saying it myself, is because I am tired of hearing certain members of this class complaining about how useless your lessons are."

The Gryffindor pointed toward the back of the classroom. "Miss Greengrass, please explain to the rest of the class the point that I am trying to get across."

Hermione turned. The normally passive Slytherin seemed surprised to even be noticed, but her recovery was admirable. "What we're doing now *is* rather useless in the grand scheme of things, no offense Professor, but your point is that really *doesn't* matter. Transfiguration is an art that must be mastered in increments, from least complex to most complex. It's a slow, gradual process. Eventually, we'll learn how to conjure objects, learn skills that we'll understand are useful in everyday life. But we'll never be able to properly conjure *anything*, or perform Transfiguration on a larger, more practical scale, if we can't master something like the Switching Spell, or anything else we've learned for the past four years." Unlike Hermione, when she was finished, Daphne Greengrass did not look to McGonagall anxiously to see if she said the right thing. She merely gazed up with same disinterested, emotionless mask that she wore most of the time.

McGonagall seemed pleased. "Thank, Miss Greengrass. Ten points to Slytherin."

It was unclear to what extent McGonagall's message about the need to work hard in her class no matter how pointless the exercises were actually got through, although a surprising number of her classmates seemed to be working on changing their wooden boxes into marble balls. Hermione got it on the second try, Harry on the fourth. She felt considerably more at ease now that she actually knew what was going on.

Finally, the bell rang, and McGonagall instructed the students that had failed to complete the assignment to work on it that evening, and those that had to write a short essay on their technique and approach. After she packed up her things, the tall Head of House came over to her. "Miss Granger, I'd like to speak with you for a moment."

She glanced at Harry, who gave her a questioning look. "Go ahead," she told him. She noticed Blaise Zabini, a rather hard and determined look on his face, followed Harry out of the classroom. She wondered what *that* was about.

When the others were gone, McGonagall spoke. "Miss Granger, may I first ask if you are feeling well? You didn't seem to be following my lecture."

"I haven't been sleeping well, Professor," she lied. She hated to lie to a teacher, but she didn't want McGonagall to know she'd drifted off either.

"Have you seen Madam Pomfrey?"

"I might, if things don't get better," she told her. "Is there something else you wanted to ask me, Professor?"

"A great many things, Hermione," she said, her voice strangely weary. She was also somewhat baffled by the use of her first name. "But first and foremost among them, I wanted to ask you when you plan to meet with me again. Our first meeting didn't go as well as I'd hoped."

"No, it didn't," she admitted. "It's not your fault, Professor. I guess I've just been avoiding it. And Harry's been so distracted he hasn't noticed."

"Miss Granger, it is not quite my place to act as your conscience, but I believe that it is very important that you learn to control your magic. Indeed, I must admit I'm rather surprised that my best student, possessed of boundless curiosity and an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, would be so reluctant," McGonagall said. "Perhaps I am wrong, Miss Granger, but I believe your lack of enthusiasm is a reflection of fear. A fear that I understand quite well. You are frightened that you may never master your abilities. You are not only afraid of failure, but you are afraid that you may hurt someone if you lose control. But ignoring it will not make it go away, Hermione. It will merely grow stronger, and harder to control."

"I know that...Professor," she said, adding the last hastily. She was not talking to a friend. She was talking to a teacher, even if that

teacher was trying to develop a closer relationship with her. She still needed to show due respect. "I think you're right, though. About my being afraid." She felt tears stinging her eyes, and tried to fight them. She didn't want to start sobbing uncontrollably in front of her Head of House.

"I can help you, Hermione," the older woman said, her voice soft and maternal. "And I *want* to help you. You have a gift, an affinity with fire that I believe may stretch well beyond casting more-powerful-than-usual Burning Hexes. My office remains open to you, Miss Granger. You are a gifted, brilliant witch. I would love to see you reach your very high ceiling."

"Thank you, Professor. And I'll find time...soon."

"Perhaps after the Second Task," McGonagall said. "I'm sure you and Miss Weasley are working quite closely with Mr. Potter to help him prepare." She definitely knew the details of the Task.

"Yes, we are," Hermione told her. The Second Task was only days away. They had the Gillyweed, they had read up on all the creatures that called the lake home, and they'd devised some strategies for fighting underwater if the need arose. Harry was about as prepared as he'd ever be. "I'll come, I promise."

"I'll be waiting for you, Miss Granger," she said, her voice becoming more clipped and authoritative. Clearly, though she'd dropped her defenses for a moment, McGonagall's outward persona was the one she preferred to use when dealing with students. "Now, I believe Mr. Potter is waiting for you."

He was ready.

The day of the Second Task had arrived, and his mind had been focused almost exclusively on it since the previous evening. As expected, Snape had found him, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville working in the library, and he'd requested, in a mildly polite tone, if Ginny and Hermione would come with him. Now, Harry knew, she was at the bottom of the Lake, awaiting his rescue. He wasn't going to disappoint her. As for Hermione, he'd decided after a great deal of

thought that he'd leave her to Krum. That he trusted Krum hardly factored into the equation. Krum wanted more than anything to prove himself. If Viktor Krum was told to go into the lake, rescue Hermione, and bring her back alive and well, that's *exactly* what he would do.

Daphne had again provided him with appropriate garments, including a snug bodysuit, something similar to a the wetsuits that Muggle Divers wore, though this one was magically heated, completely airtight, and doubled as protective body armor. Over the bodysuit, he wore loose-fitting, heavy robes, so that he wouldn't freeze on the way over to the Lake, but could still shed the heavier clothing and get in the water in a hurry.

Tightly bundled and roaring with anticipation, the crowd of students and teachers had gathered at the far side of the lake. Bleachers had been set up along the shore, but many students, wanting to be closer to the action, had gathered in a large mob in front of the stands.

Harry had anticipated walking to the shore of the Lake alone, but Luna Lovegood was waiting patiently for him as soon as he exited the castle through the massive double doors. Without a word being spoken, she'd begun walking at his side, once in a while deliberately falling behind and skipping to catch up. As baffled as he was by her behavior, he was touched by her loyalty, and appreciative of the company.

Once they'd drawn closer and spotted the other Champions waiting along the shoreline, Luna left his side as unannounced as she'd come to it, skipping off into the crowd. Harry looked around, trying to find his guardian, but he couldn't see her. He hurried to join the others. The Durmstrang ship was moored in the distance, nearly concealed by the clouds of thick fog that covered the lake.

All of them seem to have had the same idea about their outer layer, as the other three Champions were also wearing heavy robes that could be discarded as soon as the Task began. Cedric gave him a weak smile as he approached, and Harry nodded at him. Krum's face was set, his muscles tensed, his posture upright and rigid. He didn't acknowledge Harry's arrival. Harry, understanding (and counting on) the Bulgarian Seeker's intensely competitive nature, didn't take

offense. Fleur Delacour was staring out over the lake, though she did turn to glance at him as soon as he stopped. As always, she was breathtaking, her silvery-blonde hair pulled back into a tight bun, her nearly-perfect figure somehow still visible despite the bulky robes.

Harry felt in his pockets for the Gillyweed, assuring himself that it was still there. He still couldn't quite believe he was expected to *eat* the slimy plant. But he also knew that the advantages to be gained far outweighed having to force down something that reportedly felt like eating octopus tentacles.

If Harry still had one concern, it was that he would probably find it difficult using magic underwater. He certainly wouldn't be able to get out the incantations, his movements would be slowed by the water's density, and he was taking a bit of a chance trusting that his webbed hands were even capable of holding a wand. He'd removed the his wrist holster, and instead tucked his wand into a specially designed loop of fabric on the left side of his midsection. Its placement would allow him comfortable and quick access if he needed it. Looking around briefly revealed nothing of the other champions' methods of breathing underwater. He expected that Cedric would use a Bubblehead Charm, a very advanced and difficult spell that he would have learned in Flitwick's N.E.W.T. Charms class.

He noticed Cedric had turned around, and Harry quickly followed his gaze. The judges' platform had seemingly materialized out of nowhere, a few meters off the ground, giving them a full view of the action. Harry could make out Dumbledore, Karkaroff, Daphne, Madam Maxime, Ludo Bagman, and, Percy Weasley. Again, Barty Crouch was absent. Daphne said the other judges been told he'd been quite ill recently, but no details were given. Harry and Ginny hadn't even bothered asking Percy. With the exception of Bagman, who looked quite excited, and winked at him when Harry looked his way, and Percy, who was stone-faced, and straight-backed, the rest of the judges looked decidedly unhappy on this dreary, cold February day. Naturally, it was the bright-faced Bagman that stood up to quiet the crowd. "Welcome, everyone, to the Second Task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament!"

He let the roar of the crowd subside before continuing. "The Champions are ready for the Second Task, which will start on my whistle. They have precisely an hour to recover what has been taken from them. The highest score will be given to the Champion that returns with their hostage first. Champions, at the ready."

Each of them took off the robes they had been wearing. Krum and Cedric wore only swimming trunks, while Fleur had opted for a more conservative blue dress made of a light material that would probably still give her a great deal of agility. Harry wondered amusedly if she'd been concerned that the entire male population of Hogwarts might drop dead at the sight of her in a skimpy bathing costume.

All four of them stood along the shore, staring back at Bagman. He waited several seconds, then blew hard into the whistle.

Harry yanked the Gillyweed out of his pocket, shoved it into his mouth, and immediately discovered that he was at an unexpected disadvantage. Even as he waded slowly into the frigid water, chewing furiously, Cedric and Fleur, who appeared to be using the Bubble-Head Charm, had already disappeared beneath the surface. Krum followed them soon after, after transfiguring the top half of his body into that of a shark. Harry was impressed.

He continued to wade further in, waiting for the Gillyweed to kick in. He heard laughter and jeers from the crowd but ignored it. He was confident, and that was what mattered. A instant after that thought, he suddenly felt as a pillow had been held against his mouth. He dove into the water, and took a deep breath as soon as he'd submerged. He watched as his fingers and toes elongated, and webbing spread upward from the gaps between them. In less than a minute, he had gills and four fins. He plunged deeper into the water, which now felt cool and crisp. He wasn't sure where he was going, and had no confidence in a Navigation Charm performed underwater. He swam in a roughly straight line, reasoning that the merpeople's settlement would probably be roughly at the center of the Lake.

He continued to dive as the bottom of the lake came into view. He suddenly realized that his vision was nearly perfect, and he no longer felt the need to blink. The unexpected advantage of the Gillyweed

buoyed his spirits. He pulled his glasses off, tucking them into another loop at his waist.

The sandy bottom was almost featureless; occasionally, a rock or clump of seaweed poked out of the soil. He kept swimming, his muscles working easily as he was propelled through the water. Neville had saved his arse.

He came upon a taller clump of weeds, and awkwardly reached down with his long, webbed fingers for his wand. He knew from Hermione's research that Grindylows inhabited places like this. Grindylows were fast predators with a horned skull, thin arms, long fingers, a mouth full of sharp teeth, and octopus-like tentacles where the feet should be, which both worked to seize smaller prey and also propelled them at impressive speeds. While they tended to work alone against smaller prey, small fish and the like, they were also known to work in packs to bring down larger prey...like Harry.

Sure enough, four Grindylows burst out of cover, rocketing through the water straight form him, teeth knashing and arms extended to seize him. Harry pointed his wand at the creatures and screamed, *"Relashio!"*

Hermione had said that the Relinquishing Spell, which in air produced hot sparks that often forced an attack to loosen or loose his grip, had "fascinating effects" when used underwater. Despite the fact that the incantation came out as an incoherent grunt, and a cloud of bubbles, a jet of scalding hot water flashed from the tip, hitting two of the Grindylows, causing them to scream in agony. Next, Harry used the Blasting Hex.

Ginny had stumbled across this little piece of information just hours before she and Hermione had been taken away by Snape. When used underwater, the Blasting Hex traveled a safe distance from the castor before exploding like a small version of the Muggle Depth Charges that Harry had seen in classic war movies with some of his non-magical friends as a child. He was not disappointed. The blast blew all four Grindylows away from him, and they seemed to decide he wasn't worth the effort as the scurried away, burned and bruised. Wand out, alert for further attacks, he proceeded through the weeds.

When he emerged, he was as lost as he'd been from the beginning. Then he spotted something. Or rather, someone...

Moaning Myrtle, of all people, hung upside-down a few meters in front of him, a curious and amused expression on her ghostly, bespectacled face. She giggled softly when she saw him. He mouthed her name, and she nodded. "Hello Harry," she said. "Nice to see you down here."

How? he mouthed.

"Oh, I like to hang out in the U-bend. When someone unexpectedly flushes the toilet..." she shrugged. Harry shuddered at the implications of what he was swimming in. "Lost, are you?"

He nodded. She flipped right-side up. "You know, I've always liked you Harry. You're *cute*."

Harry tried to hide the bafflement and disgust he felt at that statement. Myrtle might be able to help him, but offending her would only drive her away, and leave him alone in the open water, scrambling around without a clue of where he was going.

Harry gestured at the what around him, then gave an exaggerated shrug. "Oh. The merpeople settlement is over is that direction, she said, pointing the right and down. "I can't go with you though; they aren't real fond of me. Honestly, they chase after me with spears and tridents!" she said indignantly. Harry was forcibly reminded of Hermione.

She gave him a sour look. "You're going to rescue *her*, aren't you. The *redhead*," she spat. She showed him a hurt look. "I'm always here, you know..." She giggled slightly. Harry wasn't able to hide his disgust as well this time around.

I'll remember that, he mouthed. *Thank you.*

Myrtle sniffed, then shot away into the distance, her sobs sounding like the clacks of dolphins. Harry began swimming in the direction she'd indicated. Eventually, mercifully, a large rock came into view. As he swam closer, he made out a mural on the side, depicting a pair

of roughly-drawn merpeople chasing down the giant squid. He swam through a gap in the rocks, and emerged into the middle of what appeared to be the merpeople settlement. On either side of a narrow road were a series of small underwater sharks. Merpeople stared at him curiously. They were nothing like the idyllic images that children knew: real Merpeople had mottled grey skin, dull green eyes, strands of seaweed-colored hair drifting in the current. Some exposed mouths full of broken, yellowed teeth. Harry noticed a tethered Grindylow beside one of the houses. He continued on through the village, reaching what appeared to be a larger village common. At the center was a massive stone stature of a merperson. Tied to the tail were two small forms, one with clouds of billowing silver hair, the other with a fiery mass of long red hair. Both were unconscious, heads lolled down to their chests, small streams of bubble emitting from their mouths every few seconds.

Harry swam over to Ginny, drawing his wand. A quick cut from the knife he'd gotten from Sirius for Christmas took care of the ropes, and he pulled her free of the stone tail. She didn't respond. Her eyes were closed, but she was alive. Harry wrapped his left arm tightly around her, and spared a glance back at Fleur's sister. He quickly decided that even if Fleur failed to retrieve her, she'd be brought safely back down to the surface. Harry kicked hard, and moved them off the right intending to loop back around and head back the way he'd come. He drew his wand, and cast the Lighting Charm, looking for the passage.

Then the world exploded.

When something explodes underwater, the number one concern is no longer fire or shrapnel. Water does not compress as air does, so the pressure wave can exert enormous force, easily hitting hard enough to kill. It is this principle that allowed the British Navy to sink submerged German submarines during both world wars, without the depth charges they dropped actually hitting the target. All that was needed was a detonation in close proximity to the submarine's hull. The blast can blow out hull plates, shred welds, destroy a submarine's precious hull integrity and send it plummeting to the bottom, its trapped crew still inside.

A thundering, muffled boom nearly blew out Harry's eardrums, and he instinctively threw up the strongest shield he could muster. Sediment was blasted off the bottom, shrouding the entire scene in a blinding mist of sand particles. The shield did its job, sparing Harry and Ginny from the brunt of the pressure wave, but he could no longer tell up from down, and the force of the impact had still blown them clear.

Inhuman shrieks of rage split the water. An instant later, a merman burst through the cloud of sand, brandishing a spear, his eyes crazed and murderous. Harry successfully executed a silent Slicing Curse that not only cut the spear in half, but took the wielder's right arm with it. The creature shrieked again, then disappeared into the clouds.

In an instant, as the sediment slowly settled and his visibility improved, he realized that he was surrounded by armed and homicidal mermen, carrying spears, tridents, stone swords, any sharp weapon that they could find. They came at him from all directions, stabbing madly.

Harry discovered at that moment that wordless magic under pressure was not nearly as difficult as it seemed. Clutching Ginny to him, he sent curses lancing out in every direction, driving the mermen back. But as soon as they'd stopped retreating, they came again. Harry fended them off, but he was tiring, he was running out of time, and they were getting closer. One of the stabs barely missed his left side, and the second thrust passed right behind Ginny. Harry unleashed a Relinquishing Hex in the warrior's face, probably blinding him. He stabbed madly before Harry destroyed his spear with another Slicing Curse.

It was time to get out of there.

Harry kicked hard with both legs, launching them upward, toward the surface and away from the crazed and murderous merpeople, who seemed reluctant to leave the settlement and pursue him, especially after he'd already wounded several of their number. He refused to look back. He focused all his efforts on reaching the surface. His ears popped. About halfway there, he felt a strange burning sensation on the sides of his throat, and saw the webbing between the fingers on his left hand begin to retract back into the skin. He forced himself to

stop breathing, knowing that his temporary gills were also fading back into his neck. He held his breath, ignoring his burning muscles, his thundering heartbeat...ignoring everything but his focus on what was directly above him, and his vise-grip hold on Ginny's torso.

Harry broke the surface, his lungs screaming for air. He managed to fill his lungs before he was dragged back into the choppy water. His right arm reached for and found his glasses, pushing them onto his face. His left arm remained wrapped tightly around Ginny, who was still unconscious. He saw that he had surfaced farther away from the shore than he'd intended. He managed to keep his head above the surface, then pulled Ginny up with him. He'd expected her to open her eyes the moment she hit open air. She didn't. That was when he noticed the waxy, ghostly pallor of her skin. The spray of freckles across her nose stood out in bleak contrast. Harry's confusion lasted only as long as it took him to notice that the water around the two of them was considerably darker, and featured a red tinge that froze his own blood in its veins.

Harry tried to pull Ginny's limp form above the water, desperate to see her awaken, to see her warm brown eyes staring back at him in bewilderment and relief, to know that his rapidly growing panic was unjustified. Instead, he found himself staring at the left side of the redhead's torso...and the deep, bloody puncture wound that had gone entirely unnoticed in his frantic race for the surface. Harry held his dripping wand in his teeth as his right hand shot to Ginny's neck, pushing into the hollow, searching for a pulse.

He found one. Weak, unsteady, and irregular, but present nonetheless. It was at that moment that he also noticed that Ginny was still taking slow, erratic breaths.

But none of that would matter if he didn't get her to shore, and under Madam Pomfrey's care. Legs still thrashing in the water as he tried to keep them both afloat, Harry seized the bottom of Ginny's Hogwarts robes and yanked hard. The fabric gave, and, though unable to see what he was doing, he somehow managed to tear off a reasonably sized piece. Harry let go of her and quickly pulled the strip of her robes around the girl's chest, covering the wound. He had no idea if it would staunch or even slow the blood flow, which had picked up as

her body was released from the enchanted sleep, which would have slowed body function down to the bare minimum. That was probably the only reason Ginny was still alive. Had her heart been beating at a normal rate, depending on when the injury was sustained, she might have already bled out.

Harry refocused on the present, tying the strip of her robes as tight as he dared. Then he took note of his position. He'd surfaced maybe a hundred meters off the beach. He was exhausted, his muscles protesting every movement as he treaded water. His fingers and toes were numb from the frigid water of the lake, and he was starting to shiver uncontrollably. The bodysuit might keep his core warm and prevent the onset of hypothermia, but that only meant so much. The crowd on the shore didn't seem to have noticed him, and he realized.

And my life is the hardly the one most at risk.

Harry yanked his wand out from his teeth, thrust his right arm into the air, and screamed, "*LUMOS RUFUS!*" at the top of his lungs. A blinding crimson fireball erupted from the tip of his wand, probably visible to people in Hogsmeade, and, if the students' fingers suddenly pointing at him were any indication, alerting those on the shore to his plight. At this distance, he could hardly make out any details through the fog, and the splashes of water on his glasses were playing havoc with his vision (how at that moment Harry wished he'd bother to learn the Water Resistance Charm from Hermione; Daphne's own charm had long since worn off).

He looked down at Ginny, willing her to awaken, but her head lolled back in the water, hair splayed out on the surface like an orange halo. Then he felt something yanking him hard in the direction of the shore. He picked up speed, clinging hard to Ginny as they raced through the water. As Harry drew close, he saw the source of the Summoning Charm.

Cedric Diggory stood in shallow water, drenched and dishelved, a towel hanging off his broad shoulders, wand thrust in a dramatic pose, like some sort of gesture of defiance to one of mankind's greatest historical enemies: the sea itself. Behind him, others were racing down to watch the spectacle, or to offer assistance. Cho Chang,

bundled and shivering, stood behind him, looking somewhat terrified. The Hufflepuff wore a look of strained concentration. Finally, when Harry reached the shallows, he canceled the spell.

Harry stumbled out of the waves, wildly hurling his wand onto the beach as he cradled Ginny's body with both arms, then falling to his knees. He lay Ginny out flat on the rocky beach. Her condition has worsened. Her skin had taken on a grey, deathly shade, and the blood had easily seeped through the thin material of her robes. Harry stared at the crowd, which had moved in closer. "*What the bloody hell are you waiting for? Get help!*" he yelled. He looked back down at his girlfriend, feeling as helpless as he'd ever felt in his life. Her chest continued to slowly move up and down, but she did not stir.

Several students stumbled through the crowd, but most just stood there in shock. Harry's rage was building with every moment. Ginny lay dying before him, he was barely capable of remaining upright, and scores of his peers just stood there, unable or unwilling to do anything.

Hermione blew through them like a battering ram, losing her towel along the way as she literally bowled over multiple students, including fellow Gryffindor Seamus Finnegan, and would have hit Lavender Brown had she not moved at the last instant. His friend skidded to a halt. She was still drenched from head-to-toe, her hair plastered against her skull. Her eyes were wide with fear and shock. She turned around, retrieved the towel she'd lost, ran back over to them, dropped to her knees, and began applying pressure. The two best friends stared at each other over the body of the redhead, unable to muster a single word.

Madam Pomfrey's entrance wasn't quite as dramatic, but she still cleared the crowd in record time, coming to their side faster than Harry had ever thought possible. She gestured for Hermione to remove the now bloody towel, and a whispered spell later, a clean white bandage had sealed itself against Ginny's skin. "She's lost a lot of blood," the Mediwitch said, more to herself than anyone else. "What happened?" she said sharply, looking to Harry.

“Explosion...merpeople went insane, started attacking...thought I'd gotten away from them...didn't know...,” Harry gasped, relieving the events in a few seconds of flashing images, sounds, and sensations. Hermione's eyes went wide with horror as she gasped. Then he realized that she wasn't looking at him. She was looking past him, out over the Lake.

Slowly, dreading what he'd see, abruptly realizing that her proximity to the blast had made this almost a certainty. Harry turned his head.

About 20 meters offshore was a small human form, floating face-down. Her silvery-blond hair shone like a beacon against the dreary grey sky. Harry's heart sunk like deadweight flung into the choppy lake. He closed his eyes, trying to forget about the carnage that surrounded him. Trying to forget about the competition that had gone from dangerous to deadly in the space of an hour.

Others had now caught sight of the floating corpse. Shaky fingers weakly pointed. Hands flew to mouths. Tears flowed freely. Jaws dropped and hung agape..

A hoarse shriek of agony, anger, frustration, and misery tore through the air. Fleur Delacour sliced through the crowd at a full sprint, diving headlong into the water, swimming out toward the body. She grasped the small form by the arm, pulling her back to shore, laying her out flat on the pebble-strewn beach, a few meters away from Harry, Hermione, and Ginny.

But it was too late for Gabrielle Delacour. The eight year old girl was long gone. Her chest was still in death, her sightless eyes staring aimlessly into the sky. Odd crimson blotches stuck out on her otherwise pale skin. Elizabeth Gilroy, a Hufflepuff 7th year and aspiring Healer who occasionally worked as Madam Pomfrey's assistant, cast a spell on the girl. Nothing happened, and the young woman looked back to her mentor and shook her head.

Harry tore his eyes away from the sight, and back to Ginny. She wasn't there. Madam Pomfrey had conjured a stretcher. From the way the crowd scattered to let them through, she was probably wearing a look declaring she was willing to hex them if they didn't get out of her way. Dumbledore stumbled down to them, holding out a

glowing blue hankerchief, a hastily created Portkey. The Hogwarts Matron seized one of the handles on Ginny's floating stretcher, then the hankerchief, and vanished in a flash of blue light.

Harry, his exhaustion long forgotten, dashed up the path back toward the castle. Hermione was hot on his heels, leaving Krum behind. They were quickly joined by Fred, George, and Ron Weasley. Percy was nowhere to be found.

A/N: Wow, that was a dramatic and emotional chappie. I ended up actually writing the last scene in sections, though I was pleased how well they fit together. Lots of people got a chance to show off in this one, but the ending was obviously the focus.

Gabrielle's death was planned out for a long time, and there is a point. I HATED how Fleur Delacour was depicted in book 6. She was this breathtakingly beautiful airhead that nobody could stand. I kept thinking "SHE participated in the Triwizard Tournament?" This also provides a reason for her to fight with Harry in the coming war. She's beautiful yes, but she's bright, skilled, and comes from a very old and influential French Light family. Like Krum, she has a role to play. And Gabrielle dying when Harry made the exact opposite choice as he did in canon had a bit of macabre irony. Of course, Harry couldn't have anticipated what was going to happen. Why it happened when and how it did will be explained in the next chapter.

The scene between Harry and Snape really illustrates how a bit of an attitude adjustment by both of them can do wonders for their relationship. Harry recognizes that Snape is working in his best interests, and Snape isn't overly cruel because Harry is respectful and cooperative. Snape also doesn't look at him and think "James Potter," which helps a great deal.

Writing Moaning Myrtle, who is completely meant as comic relief by the way, is almost as fun as writing Snape. My little brother does a horrifyingly accurate impression of her, and I had him read the lines I'd given her. I got goosebumps. The girl is *creepy*.

Lots of Harry/Ginny in this chapter. I'd intended to keep it in the background, but that might not be so easy. Both characters are huge

parts of the story. There is also going to be a major shake-up in book 5 that really provides a big part of the plot. A steady relationship, given the circumstances, is simply not possible. Again, this will not become a fluff-fest.

Cedric's loyalty to Harry was displayed big-time here. Ginny was stabbed by that spear thrust Harry thought had passed behind her. There wasn't any blood initially because her vitals were down to almost zero from the magical hibernation. Injuring her also made several plot developments possible.

McGonagall is very, VERY concerned with Harry, and for good reason. Harry is still denying that Daphne is as screwed up as she is, and Ginny is agreeing with him to avoid bringing up awkward questions. I really like McGonagall, and she's a strong character. Once again, she's the voice of reason, and once again, Harry rebuffs her. She doesn't punish him because she knows that she didn't have a real right to bring up the subject in the first place. If she was being inconsiderate and rude to him, he could do the same. And he did, especially with that quip about the Longbottoms, something Harry did to intentionally get her attention.

Ah, another look inside Hermione's mind, as well as a little more information on the theory behind Transfiguration. That's something that isn't well explained by Rowling, intentionally or unintentionally. I read a book, the Psychology of Harry Potter, which had a chapter dealing with that, as well as one that rebuffed the arguments of the first one. It's a good read for any Potter fan who is interested in why people do what they do.

Neville got a chance to show what he could do in this chapter, and even Luna got in an appearance. The former especially will be featured far more often in the chapters to come.

A lot of things concerning Crouch and his schemes will be revealed in the next chapter, entitled, "A Snake in Wolf's Clothing." Also coming is another shot for Blaise Zabini.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter 19: A Snake in Wolf's Clothing

Harry burst into the Hospital Wing at a dead run, then was hit by a wave of nausea and a blinding pain in his skull. His skin burned, his muscles seared with agony, and he dropped to his knees, cursing his carelessness. He knew the effects of severe exhaustion and dehydration instantly. Outside of a goblet of pumpkin juice, he hadn't drunken anything all day and had just gone through almost two hours of grueling physical activity. Hermione was at his side in an instant, but the Weasley boys continued into the Infirmary.

"Are you alright?" Hermione asked. Her voice was soft, frightened.

"No," he groaned. He couldn't lie to himself, much less Hermione.

"Oh," she said, realizing what was wrong. "How did you even *make* it this far?" she asked.

"I *wanted* to," Harry answered simply. "Not smart."

"No, it wasn't," Daphne's voice came from behind him. She grabbed him under the armpits, and Hermione helped her haul him into a bed. Madam Pomfrey came bustling their way, looking extremely displeased.

"Never know what's good for you, do you, Mr. Potter?" she said. "Lucky you didn't kill yourself. And I've told you before: when you are in pain, your body is telling you to *stop doing what you are doing*."

"*Ginny..?*" he gasped.

Madam Pomfrey's lips pressed into a thin line. "She should recover, but she's lost an awful lot of blood. Much more and I might not have been able to do anything. I've loaded her up with blood replenishment potions, and cast a Healing Spell on her wound. "I'll have a better idea what to expect in a few hours...now, *lie down*." Hermione's expression wordlessly echoed her.

Daphne draped a blanket over him, while Madam Pomfrey brought over a tray of potions. First though, she handed him a huge glass of water. When he didn't immediately starting drinking, she tipped it

back and practically forced it down his throat, water splashing on his already-drenched body and the bed he lay on. He took a breath, and took several more large gulps. Madam Pomfrey set the tray down and bustled back down the row of beds, probably checking on Ginny. Daphne was standing near the opposite wall, looking away from him, deep in thought. Hermione gripped his hand in a silent gesture of support. "Ginny," he whispered.

"Her brothers are over there," Hermione reminded him. "Besides, *you* need your own minder. I know you were worried about Ginny, but what in Merlin's name were you *thinking*? Have you ever heard of the Battle of Marathon?"

Knowing where she was going with this, he nodded. He took several more gulps of water. The dizziness subsided, but his body felt like a lead weight. The slightest movement caused him supreme agony. Harry wasn't sure how muscles there were in the human body, but in the course of the desperate underwater battle, the race for the surface, and the long run to the Hospital Wing, he seemed to have strained all of them.

Hermione took a few deep breaths, trying to calm herself. Her face was also red, and her body unsteady, rocking back and forth, shaking a bit. Clearly, that kind of physical exertion wasn't the norm for her. He offered her some of his water, and she gratefully accepted. Then she filled it with an Extinguishing Spell. As well as being capable of putting out just about any normal fire, the magical water was perfectly safe to drink. "What happened down there?" she whispered anxiously. "You said something about an *explosion*?"

He nodded. "Dunno where it came from...used a Shield to protect Ginny and me...drove the merpeople crazy...probably thought they were being attacked...probably also what killed Gabrielle," he said, taking a full breath between each phrase. His nausea had also lessened. He was starting to shiver, though, and clutched the blanket tighter.

"I can't believe she's dead..," Hermione whispered in a strained voice, not to him but to the room itself. "It wasn't supposed to be like this...did the merpeople get her too?"

"No," Harry said. "Like I said...Ginny and I were protected...she wasn't...didn't stand a chance."

Hermione looked directly into his eyes. "Daphne was *right*, wasn't she?" she whispered, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the woman in question stood just meters behind her. Of course, the Grey Maiden didn't seem to hear her either. "It wasn't a *coincidence* that your name ended up in the Goblet. The dragon's aggressiveness *wasn't* the result of normal maternal instincts. Somebody's trying to get you *killed*, Harry." She looked utterly terrified by the prospect.

"Hey, I'm still here, aren't I?" Harry said. It was the wrong thing to say.

Hermione's eyes locked with his, rage blazing behind the normally curious chocolate-brown eyes. "Sorry," he said. "I'm worried about it, too."

That seemed to placate her for the moment. "How did the Gillyweed work?" she asked, probably trying to distract herself from a tempest of her own emotions.

"Perfectly," Harry said. "I had fins, gills, everything. Didn't need my glasses either; I could see perfectly. Got a little lost though. Ran into Moaning Myrtle."

Hermione's eyes went wide. "Moaning Myrtle was in the *lake*?"

"Yup," he said, grinning at the look of disgust on her face. "Helped me find the settlement. Oh, and she might as well have professed her undying love for me. Luckily she told me where to go before she realized why I needed the information."

"*Ugh*," Hermione groaned. "She *likes* you?"

Harry gave a helpless shrug, and regretted it, wincing as his muscles protested.

"Sometime you think you've heard everything..." Hermione remarked, her voice trailing off.

Daphne abruptly turned around. "Harry," she said, getting down on one knee next to his bed. "Can you tell me what happened?"

He briefly described the morning's events, elaborating on the explosion when Daphne asked him to go into specifics. "Looks like I was right. Charlie told me that nesting dragons care more about protecting the eggs than killing the threat. That was clearly not the case with your Short-Snout. And now this..."

"Hermione reckons you're right as well," Harry said. At Daphne's glance, Hermione gave a nod of confirmation.

"Hopefully Albus can see the same things that we have. No matter what we've done to make this competition safer, someone has sabotaged our efforts without being noticed. We've been infiltrated," she concluded.

Harry was curious about something. "Daphne, how did the scoring work?"

"Harry!" Hermione hissed at him.

Daphne also seemed surprised he'd think of that given the circumstances, but answered anyway. "Krum returned with you first, less than a minute before Diggory surfaced with Chang," she said, looking at Hermione. Krum got an average score of about 10, which puts him right back in the thick of things after failing to complete the First Task. I gave him a 9," she said. "His transfiguration tactic may have been functional, but it was also somewhat dangerous. There are better ways to breath and move underwater than creating a shark-human hybrid."

Harry nodded. "You said Cedric finished second. What was his approach? How'd he score?"

"Diggory used the Bubblehead Charm, brought back Chang without incident, and finished second. All of us gave him a nine."

"Fleur didn't make it," Harry said grimly.

"No, she swam into a rather nasty pack of Grindylows, and had to be rescued. A few of her classmates retrieved her. She was quite distraught, and I wasn't very impressed with her emotional control." Something passed through her eyes. "Obviously, her fears were justified. She got a zero because she failed to complete the task, or even get close. She didn't come back with her hostage." Daphne laughed darkly at the horrifying irony. "She was just eight-years old," Daphne said, shaking her head. "She wasn't even old enough for school."

She laughed another humorless laugh. "And the best part is that while any sane person would suspend the Tournament in response to this tragedy, we *can't*. It's the same magically-binding contract rubbish that trapped you. Nobody's ever explained to me the consequences of failing to honor the agreement, but I've heard their rather nasty, and also quite real. So the Third Task will go ahead as planned. Gabrielle Delacour's death will go down as a tragic *accident*."

As if on cue, the doors to the Hospital Wing opened again. Dumbledore and Madame Maxime, both of whom had to duck to avoid hitting their heads on the doorframe, entered, a stretcher floating between them. The body was covered by a white shroud, but it could only be one person. Madam Pomfrey waved them over to a bed, and once they'd gently laid the girl on it, the curtain were closed. Madame Maxime was sobbing, and Dumbledore laid a hand on her shoulder. He turned to look at Harry, but said nothing as he left with the grieving Beauxbatons Headmistress.

Tears tracked down Hermione's face. Harry gave her a look, and she bent over and pressed her face against his blanket. Harry put a hand on her shoulder as she cried. Daphne, looking almost embarrassed, silently departed, though she grabbed his wand from the bedside table before she left. He didn't bother asking why. Daphne, no doubt, had a theory that she wanted to check, and she needed Harry's wand. He wouldn't be using it today anyway.

Harry found it strangely ironic that Gabrielle's body had been brought to a place where the living recovered, presumably awaiting transport back to France so she could be properly mourned. Hogwarts didn't

have a morgue. Harry wondered darkly if that wouldn't change in the next few years.

Hagrid had once told him that the normally baffling centaurs became downright cryptic when Harry was being carried out of the Forest following his encounter with Voldemort. One phrase in particular, spoken by Ronan, echoed in his mind.

"Always innocent are the first victims. So it has been for ages past, so it is now."

At the time, Harry thought he'd been talking about the slain unicorn. He wondered now if he hadn't looked into the future and seen this moment, this senseless death of a child, occurring just as the forces of Darkness prepared to wage war on the world once again.

On their way out of the Hospital Wing, Ron and the Twins had stopped at his bedside. "Thank for bringing her back, Potter," George said.

"You don't need to thank me," Harry told them. "Ginny means a great deal to me. I did what I did not just because she's my girlfriend, but because I know that she would have done the same thing."

"Probably right on that," Fred said, not sounding entirely comfortable with the concept. "Nonetheless, you have our thanks."

"Do with them what you wish," George said. "Got anything to say, Ron?"

The 4th Year Gryffindor grimaced, then said, in a barely audible voice, "Thanks, Potter."

"You're welcome."

"Well, we'll leave you two, then," George said. "You alright, Harry?"

"Just a little tired," Harry told him.

"A *little*?" Fred asked, pointing at the bed.

“Harry’s a bit prone to understatement,” Hermione cut in, glaring at him. “He nearly killed himself running up here, and now he’s not much better off than Ginny.”

The twins stared at him for a moment, then Fred said, almost offhandedly. “You know, you’re a good chap, Potter.”

With that, the Weasleys left. Harry couldn’t help but wonder if maybe the wall of hostility separating him from the rest of Ginny’s family had started to crack.

As it turned out, Harry didn’t even miss a day of classes. Madam Pomfrey reluctantly pronounced him fully recovered from his bout with exhaustion and near-dehydration. Still, he spent almost every second of the time he wasn’t in class as Ginny’s bedside. She’d woken up briefly the day after her ordeal in the Lake, but she was still extremely weak, and wasn’t going to be leaving for some time. The wound she’d suffered, combined with the frigid water, had put a tremendous strain on her body.

For once, Harry found himself in a position he knew that his guardian and friends knew all too well. As he watched over Ginny, wondering if she was ever going to stare at him with those gorgeous brown eyes again, he gained a new understanding of the anxiety and fear that he’d caused his friends on the multiple occasions when he’d ended up lying unconscious in the Hospital Wing.

He’d been sitting there, watching her, memorizing every last feature of her face, every curve of her jaw, every last individual freckle, when her parents had finally come to visit.

He’d looked up as a plump redheaded woman practically radiating anxiety and protectiveness had barged into the Hospital Wing. Molly Weasley had been followed by tall, balding Arthur Weasley, and Professor McGonagall. Harry could have left at that moment, giving her family privacy. But he didn’t.

Molly hurried down the rows of beds, reaching Ginny’s in record time. She took one look at her daughter, paled a bit, and then looked at

Harry. "Dear, would you mind if my husband and I might have a private moment with our daughter?"

So much for that. Deciding he didn't want to alienate Ginny's mother right off-the-bat, he began to get up.

"No, it's alright. He can stay, Molly," Arthur Weasley said. A small smile grew on McGonagall's lips.

"Are you sure?" she whispered.

Arthur nodded. "Good to see you again, Harry." He held out a hand, and Harry shook it. He pointed to Molly. "This is my wife, Molly."

"We've met," Harry said. "At Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ before my First Year." He smiled pleasantly at her. "It's nice to see you as well, Ma'am."

She didn't really respond, and was staring at him uncomfortably. Harry understood that she wanted him to leave, despite her husband's wishes, but was too polite to ask. He was an outsider, maybe even, in her mind, a threat; a threat that was trying to take her prized daughter away from her. There was probably some distrust from his actions while he'd been possessed by Riddle, including seizing Ginny in this very room before spiriting her off to the Chamber of Secrets, and Petrifying Ron. Now, that boy she didn't entirely trust was growing up, and taking her innocent daughter with him.

It was irrational, paranoid, and short-sighted, but from what Ginny had told him of her mother, it was exactly what would be running through her mind at this moment. Ginny assured him that she'd been the most compassionate and caring person in the world once she warmed to him, but it seemed that wouldn't be as easy as he'd hoped.

"So, you and Ginny are seeing one another?"

So much for subtlety. Ginny had told him her mother had been quite pleased that he'd invited her to the Yule Ball, and even happier that they were considering a relationship. That goodwill seemed to have evaporated here, as she stood over her daughter's unconscious body. Harry decided he'd hold off in his assessment of Molly Weasley's

character for a time when Ginny was healthy and happy. Given who the woman was, it wasn't fair to judge her in this circumstance.

"Yes, we've been together since the Yule Ball. We'd been friends since she came to Hogwarts, but both of us felt something...more." He didn't really want to go into specifics with Ginny's mother.

"How did this happen?" Arthur Weasley asked, looking back towards his daughter, his face turning grim again. "Dumbledore wasn't very specific, except to say she was injured by a merman's spear. Aren't they normally quite peaceful?"

Harry nodded. "There was an explosion just after I freed Ginny. They felt threatened, and attacked the thing that was most unfamiliar to them: us." He took a deep breath. "I thought I'd fended them off, and made a run for the surface. The Gillyweed I'd used was wearing off," he explained. "I didn't realize Ginny had been injured until I reached the surface."

"It's alright-" Arthur began to reassure him.

"What about that poor Delacour girl?" Molly interrupted sharply.

Harry had to control his breathing to keep from losing it right then and there. *Is she seriously implying..?*

He took a deep breath. "If I'd *known* what was going to happen, I would have taken her with me, because that's the kind of *person* that I am. But I *didn't* know. The blast killed her instantly. There was *nothing* I could do," he said, the level of his voice rising with every word.

Molly Weasley seemed to have realized her mistake. "Oh, dear, I didn't *mean*...oh I'm sorry, I'm sure you did everything you could..."

"Harry, I mean nothing by this, but if the blast killed that girl, how did you and Ginny survive? You were nearby, of course." Arthur Weasley cut off his wife's apologetic ramblings with a question he had to be dying to know the answer to.

"I created a Shield...instinct, you know. I...I used to study Muggle history as a child. During the war, they used these bombs that exploded in the water to sink the enemy ships. I recognized that the biggest problem wasn't the explosion, but the pressure wave that followed it. That's what..." he took a deep breath. "*That's* what killed Gabrielle. We were protected."

"Conjuring a shield strong enough to leave you unscathed is quite impressive, Harry," Arthur said. Harry blushed slightly at the praise. The truth was he hadn't really done anything consciously. It had just...happened. *And thank Merlin it had...*

At that moment, almost in answer to a silent prayer, Ginny stirred. Molly was all over her as her brown eyes blinked open. But they looked past her, and found Harry, before returning to her mother. Molly didn't look pleased by that. "Hey," she said to him, as if she hadn't noticed her parents.

"Hey," he replied. "How are you feeling?"

"Just...tired. Really, *really* tired. Guess it must have been pretty bad if they called you here," Ginny said, turning her attention to her parents.

"We came as soon as we could," Arthur assured her, giving his daughter a pat on the shoulder. "We wanted to come sooner, but I was held up by my work, and your mother wanted both of us to be here. I assure you though, that if it had been at all possible, we would have been here as soon as we'd heard."

"Heard about what?" Ginny asked, her voice drowsy. "What happened to me? The last thing I remember...well, Dumbledore asked me to close my eyes, and I felt myself falling asleep." She frowned. "Then I remember being very cold, and...here I am," she finished.

"Things went badly during the Second Task," Harry explained. He made a decision not to mention that the explosion was most likely an attempt on his life. It wouldn't do him any good if he convinced her parents that Ginny was in danger just by virtue of being close to him. "You were wounded, almost bled out before we got you to the

Hospital Wing.” Harry’s voice was shaking, and he could feel tears welling up. He’d come so *close* to losing her.

And he hadn’t even *realized* until it had almost been too late. He shuddered slightly. Ginny’s eyes filled with concern, and he gave her a reassuring smile. He reached down and ran his hand through her long red hair.

It was as if Molly and Arthur weren’t even in the room. Ginny closed her eyes, sighing contentedly.

That was enough for Molly. “Harry,” she said, her voice soft, but with an edge. “Would you mind giving us some time alone with Ginny?”

“I want him to stay,” Ginny protested. “I’m alright, Mum, really I am. Just tired. You needn’t have come all the way up here in the first place.”

“We heard that you’d been hurt, and we came as soon as we could manage. It’s nothing less than you should expect, Ginny. And I think it would be a good idea if Harry left for a while.”

“Why? Because he isn’t a member of the *family*? Does it even matter to you that I care about him as much as any of my brothers, maybe *more* than some of them?” The level of Ginny’s voice was rising. “You don’t need to be anywhere, do you Harry?”

“Not at the moment, no,” Harry said. Truth be told, he didn’t feel any inclination to leave Ginny’s side.

“Nonetheless,” Molly said, a hard edge to her voice. “I would like to have a bit of time alone with you and Arthur, Ginny. Harry can come back later.”

Ginny looked ready to explode, but Harry gave her a warning look. Best to give Molly what she wanted this time. Besides, her demands weren’t exactly unreasonable. Even if Ginny thought of him that way, he *wasn’t* a part of the Weasley family. “Alright,” he said. “I’ll see you later,” he promised his girlfriend.

She smiled at him, and he left. He decided to go outside. He needed a place to think.

Harry donned gloves and some heavier robes, and headed out. It didn't take him long to decide where he wanted to go. The Lake seemed to exert an irresistible force, and he silently crossed the deserted grounds. The stands were long gone, the shore seemingly devoid of life. Well, *almost*...

Though she was sitting with her back to him, he recognized Fleur's tall profile and the waterfall of silvery-blond hair that fell freely over her shoulders. Most wizards would have left her alone. But guilt, however unjustified, had been eating away at him. He knew that there was nothing that he could have done, that as soon as the completely unpredictable explosion had occurred, it would have been too late. There had been no logical reason to bring Gabrielle with him. His assumption that Dumbledore would guarantee her safety even if Fleur failed to reach her sister had been rooted in a rock-solid assessment of the man's character and morals.

But that wasn't enough. He had to talk to her. Even if he couldn't make her understand, he needed to at least express his condolences. She'd suffered a grievous loss, one that few others could comprehend. He was one of those people. He knew what it was like to have family taken from him, without warning or reason. Voldemort had come to Godric's Hollow with the intention of killing Harry. He'd killed James and Lily because they'd attempted to interfere.

Harry slowly approached the girl, who was seated on a bench overlooking the Lake. She didn't look at him when he approached, didn't react even after he'd sat down next to her. Her eyes were hard, but she could not hide her sorrow. "Hello, Fleur."

She didn't respond, but a single tear tracked down her cheek. Her expression became more strained as she fought back a show of emotion. "I'm sorry, Fleur," he said, his voice soft and sincere. "I know what it is like to lose family."

"You would," she said quietly, her words barely audible. "*Ma soeur* was so innocent, so naïve. She always saw...how do you say...*ze*

silver lining of every cloud?" Her English was heavily accented, and mixed with the occasional French.

"Essentially," Harry replied.

Fleur laughed harshly. "I was very *excited* about 'ze opportunity to stay at 'ogwarts. I wanted to improve my *anglais*. I believed zat I would be chosen to represent our school, but even if I wasn't, I expected zat I would gain far more zan I would lose." She sighed. "I don't blame you, if zat is why you are here. Madame Maxime explained what happened. "You 'ad your own 'ostage to save. You had no responsibility for Gabrielle." She struggled to say her dead sister's name. "*Mais, j'ai raté!* I was stopped by *Grindylows!*" she shrieked, her emotional control breaking. Another harsh laugh. "And at 'ze time, I was of course worried about my sister, but I was concentrated on my own failure. My first thought was zat I 'ad probably cost myself a chance at 'ze trophy. None of zat matters anymore. I 'ave already lost 'ze only thing zat really matters." Her body was wracked by sobs. Harry watched her silently. He thought about giving her a comforting touch, but decided against it, not knowing how she'd react.

"Do you remember your parents? Do you remember how it felt to lose them?" she asked abruptly. Tracked with tears, her face was one of the most beautiful he'd ever seen. He couldn't help but be attracted to her, despite his feelings and relationship with Ginny. And now that he was seeing the depth of her emotions and understanding, the attraction was all the stronger. Still, even if he hadn't been seeing Ginny, he doubted that Fleur was right for him specifically. But if she ever did settle down with someone, they'd have committed to a witch whose intellect and passion matched her beauty.

"Honestly, I've got precious few memories of them, before that night. I suppose I've missed them in the past, but my guardian has always been there for me. I often wonder what would have happened if they hadn't been killed. And I do regret that I never got the chance to know them. All I hear are colored recollections from old friends and rivals, with all the deceiving biases that go along with them. I wish I had the chance to judge for myself."

Fleur seemed to study him for a moment. "I was wrong, you know, when I called you a *boy*. I did not understand. What you have been through, what you understand...those are *not* 'ze experiences and concerns of a child."

"I'm been forced to grow up quickly," Harry admitted. "There are a lot of expectations, and a lot of dangers that I have to face, because of who I am. And there are certain...duties that have been thrust upon me. Duties that no one my age should be forced to take on."

"Life isn't *fair*," Fleur said bitterly.

"No, it isn't," Harry agreed.

"My mother was heartbroken when she came for 'ze body yesterday. My father betrayed little emotion, but I could see zat a part of 'im 'ad died inside. 'Er body 'as been taken back to France. Once zis 'orrible Tournament is over, zere will be a proper funeral," she explained. "Until zen, 'ze body will 'ave a Stasis Spell cast on it." Harry noted how she used "the body," a cold, impersonal description.

"I'm sorry this had to happen to you," Harry told her. "I wish I could tell you that it gets easier, but I can't. I don't really know what it is like to know someone for a long period of time and then lose them in the blink of an eye."

"You nearly did," she pointed out. "'Ze redhead, Ginny?"

Harry closed his eyes. "Yeah, I nearly did at that. She's alright. She's a fighter."

"You are like no other person zat I 'ave ever met, Harry Potter," she said. "It is not merely zat you do not act your age. You 'ave a remarkable perspective on life."

"Thank you."

"I am not sure if zat was a compliment or not," she said. "But I thank you for hearing me out. Everyone is offering me a shoulder to cry on. I needed a sympathetic and understanding ear. You provided it."

"I'm glad that I could help," Harry said, getting up to leave. "You know where to find me if you'd like to talk again."

She nodded. "It isn't zat hard. 'Ze Library, 'ze Slytherin Dormitories...or right 'here," she added.

He left her to her thoughts. But he was not alone. As he recognized the presence of another, Blaise Zabini stepped from behind a bush, a hard look in his eyes. "Potter," he said.

"Zabini," Harry countered. "What do you want?"

"It's bloody well amazing that you haven't figured out the answer to that question yet," Blaise said, losing control of his temper. "I've only been hinting at it for over a year. You know, as perceptive as you claim to be, you look at me as some annoying bug that follows you around and occasionally tries to climb up your robes."

"That's not true," Harry said defensively. "You...you can't just expect me to trust you. I think...no, I *know* I made a mistake trusting you so easily during my Third Year."

"And what have I done to make it a *mistake*?" Blaise demanded. "I kept your secrets, Potter. No one knows about your nightmare. No one knows about the Room of Requirement. No one knew about how much you cared for Ginny when she was throwing herself all over you after she got Sorted into Slytherin."

"Zabini, I respect-"

"I don't want to be *respected!*" Blaise cried. "I don't want to be your *ally*. I don't want you to try to *impress* me, to *keep up appearances* like you do with Greengrass and the others. I want to be your *friend!* Is it too much to ask for you to give me that chance?"

Harry stared at him, mind racing. "I suppose-"

"You *suppose*?" Blaise demanded. "What, it is some sort of *privilege* to be *friends* with the Boy-Who-Lived?"

"Don't call me that," he warned. "That's not what-"

"If it isn't what you meant, than you need to reconsider your words, 'cause that's *exactly* what it sounded like," Blaise told him. "Look, Potter, if you'll just tell me you don't want to be friends with me, and give me a decent reason, I'll back off. So go on? Why don't you want me to be your friend?"

Harry opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Blaise was persistent as hell, but it didn't change the fact that he was *right*. The Slytherin had rescued Hermione out in the Forest at the risk of his own life, never revealed a single piece of sensitive information after he and Harry had discontinued their brief friendship. He'd been there when Harry had been sent the vision of Bertha Jorkin's death, his concern real. And now he stood here, oblivious to the cold, demanding that Harry find a reason that his efforts could not be rewarded.

I don't have one, he realized. I mean, I feel most comfortable with Ginny and Hermione, but Blaise isn't asking to become my best mate. He'd just like to be given a real chance to let this work.

Just like Ginny urged me not to abandon a relationship between us before it got started.

That was different.

Was it? Sure, he felt something for Ginny. But he also believed that Blaise could be a good friend. Relatively speaking, those two preconditions were the same.

"I don't have one."

"Exactly."

Harry stared at him for another moment, as if trying to discern something that he had missed. Something dishonest, or even sinister. He failed.

"Then I'll give you a chance."

"That's all I wanted. I don't need you to spill your heart out to me, but I'd like to feel like I wasn't being completely kept out of the loop."

“Then I’ll do my best to make sure that doesn’t happen. I’m still going to have this by Hermione and Ginny.”

“And if they aren’t that enthusiastic about the possibility of adding another member to the Shadow Trio?”

“What?”

“Nickname. Lavender’s work, I think. You’re skirting around the question.”

And what a loaded question it was. Blaise was testing his loyalty to his friends, his honesty, his willingness to honor an agreement despite dissension from those close to him, and even his friends’ willingness to accept him. Still, there was only one answer that he could give.

“It won’t be their choice. Granted, if you do something to completely alienate them, you’ll most likely alienate me at the same time. But if it’s just a matter of them not liking you, they’ll have to adjust.”

Blaise nodded. “Thank you. So, want to grab dinner?”

The sun had begun to set below the Scottish Hills, and Harry’s stomach rumbled its own request. “I think that answers that question,” he said, grinning.

They headed back to the castle, talking quietly. While he didn’t reveal all of the details, he ran Daphne’s theory of a plot against his life by his new friend.

Blaise’s matter-of-fact response was instant, delivered without hesitation. “Watch your back, mate. She’s right.”

It was not soon after that Harry began to fill Blaise in on some of the details of the suspicious events surrounding the Tournament. Blaise seemed adept at getting inside the minds of others. He rattled off a number of precedents that suggested this kind of thing was quite typical of Voldemort.

“Dad always told me that Voldemort’s cruelty wasn’t demonstrated by the spells he used or the people he killed. He likes to toy with people, to test them. He prefers to delegate simple tasks to his underlings. That says, he chooses his underlings.”

“So you’re saying that Voldemort sending an agent to Hogwarts, and having him try to get me killed under the guises of the Tournament is completely in-character,” Harry replied.

“Absolutely,” Blaise said. “For all the talk, the expectations, I suspect the Dark Lord doesn’t really know what to think of you. You’ve survived, but even you admit that luck had a great deal to play in that.”

“Voldemort’s Killing Curse just *happened* to hit me in the pocket where I was carrying the Philosopher’s Stone,” Harry pointed out.

To his credit, Blaise, who hadn’t heard that particular detail before, barely skipped a beat. “Things like that, yeah. There’s no denying that you are powerful, Harry-”

“Even that was due to a bit of luck,” Harry said. “Well, both kinds, actually. Bad that Daphne hit me with a curse that shredded my mind in the process of banishing Riddle. Good in that Riddle’s magic was left behind, and incorporated into my own.” Harry laughed. “I’m probably not doing a good job of convincing you that I stand a chance against Voldemort right now.”

Blaise’s expression was deadly serious. “I don’t think any reasonable human being expects you to be able to fight him to a stalemate at this point. But your current and potential allies, Voldemort and his allies, your friends and confidantes, and, I suspect, you yourself, are all interested in the answer to the same question. That question concerns your abilities, your power, your cunning and ability to escape deadly situations time and time. Essentially, Harry, we all want to know what you *really* are.”

“You included Voldemort in that group.”

“Of course I did; that was where I was going. The Dark Lord doesn’t know what to do about you. In the past, he might have dismissed you

as a child with delusions of grandeur. But after being foiled by you on multiple occasions, he's no longer sure that is the answer," Blaise said.

"You say that as if you know it to be true."

Blaise cracked a small smile. "I know many things, Harry, but I don't have an inside source in Voldemort's ranks. I'm just trying to think like he does."

"You do realize that you are violating a key law of empirical analysis, right? You are trying to make the evidence fit your theory. You are working off a number of assumptions that may or may not be accurate."

Blaise shrugged. "It's just the way I think. I suppose I do jump to conclusions at times, but it doesn't mean that I'm not often right."

"I think it's a mistake for either of you to assume you know what Voldemort thinks," Hermione said. She'd managed to sneak into the Room of Requirement unnoticed. "New friend?" she asked, gesturing at Blaise. "Or old one?"

Sometimes I feel like my entire life is just one huge exam. Hermione's question was both spectacularly in and out-of-character for the Muggle-born Gryffindor. The enigmatic word choice wasn't like Hermione. The reasons for her asking; her distrust of Blaise, in part because he wasn't overly fond of Muggle-borns, and the implicit violation of trust that came with sharing private information with such a person, were Hermione Jane Granger in a nutshell.

His mind quickly considered what she meant. "Old one" might very well refer to the more immature and glory-seeking Blaise Zabini that had befriended Harry because his parents had asked him to, with "new friend" implying that Blaise had since changed, and now had more trustworthy motives.

"New one," Harry answered after the briefest of pauses. "Hermione, meet my classmate, Blaise Zabini. The black boy caught on immediately, and rose, offering a hand.

Hermione kept her arms crossed over her chest. "Cute," she said, her eyes boring into Harry's. "This is not a joking matter, Harry. Not right now."

"Unlike a fine wine, it seems that Granger's opinion of me hasn't gotten better with time," Blaise remarked. "Hermione, if I might ask, what's wrong with me?"

Hermione blinked. "What?"

Blaise's expression was eerily calm. "What's wrong with me?" he repeated. "Surely, if you are so resistant to my being included in your little group, you must have mountains of complaints about me. So let's hear them."

Hermione's jaw tightened slightly, and she glanced at Harry. He nodded at her.

Brown eyes bored in on the Slytherin. "You're a pompous pureblood with an inflated sense of self-importance and an unusually heavy reliance on your parents. You are prone to making gross generalizations. You don't understand the political games of your House nearly as much as you think you do. You think less of Muggle-borns because they aren't as magically learned as you are, ignoring the gross societal injustices that made such a knowledge gap possible. And Harry trusts you, for reasons I don't entirely understand," she said.

"That last is a *bad* thing?" Blaise asked.

"If everything I said before about you is true, then yes, Blaise, that is a *very* bad thing. If you aren't qualified to give advice, but insist on giving it anyway, and Harry believes you, then I believe you are functioning as a bad influence, in just about every sense of the word."

"What if I told that I'd changed?"

"I wouldn't believe you," Hermione said bluntly. "Because it'd be very much in your nature to pretend you had, in order to convince Harry that I was just being paranoid."

"Then what could he do to prove it to you?" Harry asked.

Hermione bit her lip. "I don't have an answer to that question. I suppose I'd need to see you act in ways that contradict my current assessment of you. Even then, I might be suspicious that it was an act."

"I'd have to be one hell of an actor to pull that off," Blaise pointed out. "And Ginny has an entirely different set of assumptions I'd have to contradict. It'll be hard enough doing it for real."

Hermione looked at Harry. "What have you told him?"

"Essentially everything involved in this alleged plot, as well as a few specifics from my encounters with Voldemort. We were brainstorming on the plausibility of him trying to test me, to find out if I was worthy of his personal attention."

"And Blaise is some sort of expert on Voldemort's *modus operandi* and thought processes?"

"I don't claim to be an expert. Harry isn't planning to do anything at the moment. But seeing as nobody has a real answer, what's the harm in speculating? We might hit upon something important by accident, if nothing else," Blaise reasoned. "You are a logical person, Hermione. You have an innate trust of empirical facts and the opinions of authorities. That's why if Dumbledore were saying the exact same things that I am, you'd think he was right. But I'm not Dumbledore."

"No, you most certainly are not," Hermione replied. She uncrossed her arms, let them hang limply from her sides, then re-crossed them. "What about the rest?"

"I'm not here because my parents asked me to be."

"So it's only a coincidence this happened just a few months after you and your parents attended a special Dark ritual with Harry? You expect me to *believe* that? Honestly!"

"Believe what you want, Granger," Blaise said, his frustration boiling over. "I'm not here because I want influence. I'm here because I care about Harry and want to be his friend."

"Not his ally," Hermione said, following the train of thought. "Alright, so what now?"

"Is simply continuing the normal routine an option?" Harry asked.

"*He* is not part of the normal routine."

"You know Granger, strange as this may seem, I do care a little about *you* as well."

"Right. You as good as admitted you brought me out of the Forest for reasons that had nothing to do with concern for me as a *person*. As Harry's friend, yes, there was some motive there. I'm not saying I'm not grateful; you may well have saved my life. But saying thank you is not the same as agreeing to trust an outsider."

"I brought you out of there because I was concerned for you as a fellow *human being*," Blaise said hotly. "I neglected to leave you out there, with a broken leg, to get eat by Merlin-knows-what because that's the kind of *person* that I am. It's just too bad you're too wrapped up in your own misinformed judgment of me that you can't recognize that."

Hermione looked shocked by the ferocity of his response. "I'm sorry," she said. "You have to understand that this isn't easy. For two years now, it's just been the three of us. And I still don't entirely trust you."

"Hermione, you don't get to determine if I spend time with him or not," Harry said. "You've got no right to use your friendship with me as leverage to change my mind. You need our friendship as much as I do. And I wouldn't expect Ginny to join you this time."

"I'm not saying I have the right to do any of the sort. But I'd like for us all to agree before you start telling him things that we might be better off keeping secret," Hermione explained.

“Because I might betray you, right?” Blaise said. “You accuse me of discriminating against Muggle-borns, but you won’t trust me because I’m a pureblood, and my family’s a Dark one, at that. It’s fine when we just want to be Harry’s *allies*. But I want more than that. And I think I deserve a fair shot.”

“And I agree,” Harry cut in. “Hermione, I don’t want to fight you. I hate it when we fight. But we can’t become so wrapped up in ourselves that we refuse to let anyone else in. Blaise can help, and, honestly, I wouldn’t mind having a member of my own gender that I could bounce ideas off of. I haven’t had that.”

Hermione sighed, looking defeated. She’d run out of ammunition, and most likely lost the will to fight as well. “Then I’ll go with you on this. But if you want *my* trust,” she said, turning to Blaise, “you’ll have to earn it.”

“I’ll do my best, then,” Blaise said. “You interested in joining the conversation?”

“Have you told Ginny?”

“Not yet. She’ll go along with it.”

“You sound certain.”

“I am. Her way of thinking is similar to mine. If I present the same arguments that won you over, I’ll win her over as well. And she was never that overtly hostile to Blaise in the first place. She mostly fed off your feelings.”

Hermione nodded, content with that explanation. She opened her mouth to speak, then glanced at Blaise apprehensively. “If I can hear it, he can hear it,” Harry told her. “If nothing else, he’s proven that he won’t betray our confidences. You can’t deny that.”

Again, she nodded. “I talked to McGonagall. We’re going to give it another go next Tuesday. She says she’s had some new ideas that might help me harness my abilities. And Harry?”

“Yes?”

She bit her lip nervously, and not from Blaise's presence. "I don't think this is just a stronger-than-usual proclivity for fire magic. I think it's something else. An affinity, of sorts. Professor McGonagall agrees with me."

"You might be able to control fire without standard magic?" Harry asked, eyebrows raised.

"Possibly," Hermione replied. "Of course, at this point it's all speculation. But I *do* want to know for sure. That's why I agreed to meet with her."

"I'm a bit lost here, mate," Blaise told Harry.

Harry gave his best friend a look. She got the message. "Well, this whole thing started while we were dueling one day, and..."

About a week later, a Monday morning, Harry's scar *burned*.

This time, it wasn't accompanied by a vision, or images of any kind. Despite his best efforts at Occlumency, he was still bombarded by alien emotions, most of them trending towards anger. Just when he was wondering if he'd have to miss classes, the pain vanished. Harry wasn't sure what to make of that. It was quite possible that whatever had calmed Voldemort wasn't good news for him.

His first class that morning was Defense Against the Dark Arts. Sitting next to Ginny, who was fully recovered, and across from Hermione and Blaise, who had declared an uneasy truce, he'd eaten breakfast, not mentioning his scar. He decided to save that news until later in the day, when they could be assured of privacy.

Blaise was obviously trying very hard to be a good friend, and had struck a good balance between helping him out and leaving him alone when he wanted it. This morning, he'd waited for Harry in the Common Room with Ginny. The two of them had a fairly amicable relationship. Zabini was no Quidditch fanatic, but he knew enough about the game to strike up more than one conversation with Harry's girlfriend. He was also eager to help the redhead if she had problems

with her assignments. So far, Hermione hadn't found out about the last. He hoped it would stay that way.

Snape had accosted him earlier that morning after breakfast, and accused him of breaking into his potions stores. Some Gillyweed was unaccounted for, so Snape's assumption wasn't unreasonable. Harry had offered to get the receipt, and Snape had let him go. He'd earned that much trust in the eyes of the Potions Master. Harry offered the possibility that it might have been stolen by who ever had set the magical bomb at the bottom of the Lake. Snape clearly saw merit in the theory, and said he would look into it.

Moody's classes had grown steadily less interesting since the dramatic demonstration of the Unforgivable Curses. That said, they'd still learned about as much as they'd learned with Lupin. Their practical exercises had been limited to mastering the most basic of offensive spells, including the Disarming Spell. But the class had also gained a more thorough understanding of curses and hexes, as well as philosophies surrounding their use. He had a strange feeling that the grizzled ex-Auror was holding back. There were surely some uptight parents that would rather they never even learn about the Unforgivables. It was quite possible that he'd been told to tone down the lesson plan after his first few classes.

Today was simply a review day for the material they'd learned just before the weekend. Moody was quizzing the class on the Blinding Curse, as well as several other spells that inhibited sensory perception. Harry hadn't been asked to contribute to the class, nor did he feel the need to share some of his favorite sequences involving the Blinding Curse. He figured that by using it to reasonably good effect in his duel against Malfoy, he'd proven his competence. Neville managed to blurt out the incantation after only a moment's hesitation. Harry flashed him a friendly smile whenever he looked his way. Building Neville's confidence wasn't going to be easy, but he'd at least taken to spending time with Hermione and participating in their study sessions. Blaise thankfully hadn't commented on the ease with which Hermione had accepted, even welcomed, the other Gryffindor's presence. So far, they had limited their interaction to schoolwork. Harry didn't think Neville was ready to deal with the kind of problems that he, Blaise, Hermione, and Ginny regularly discussed.

Blaise had already participated in several dueling sessions, and his prior training had been on display. That said, Harry hadn't found an area that he really excelled at. Some witches and wizards took better to certain kinds of spells, though not normally to the extent that Hermione had with fire-related magic. Blaise said he'd continued to work with blades as well. Harry was somewhat intrigued by the possibility of learning a second weapon besides his wand. Blaise preferred a heavy, two-handed broadsword that had been imbued with a Lightning Charm to make it easier to wield. Most Goblin-made swords were both lighter and stronger than their Muggle companions, but the weapons still required physical strength to use to great effect.

Moody took a swig from his hip-flask, and then grunted. The end of class was rapidly approaching, and the time from its arrival had an inverse relationship with the students' concentration level. "The Blinding Curse is a very useful tool in battle. Just recently, I had a chance to see a very creative and quite effective use of it in a duel. So did the rest of you. Assuming any of you remember the details of that clash, of course." The class was unimpressed. Parvati passed a note under her desk to Lavender. Moody's magical eye probably noticed, but it was possibly he'd given up on those two gossiping Gryffindors.

"I told all of you last week that I expected you to study both the information presented in class and the reading material from the textbook," he growled. "I also told you that if you didn't take my advice, you'd regret it. My advice includes giving your complete and undivided attention to *me*, Miss Brown, Miss Patil. Five points from Gryffindor, and give me that note." He hobbled over and extended a gnarled hand. Lavender Brown handed it to him with considerable trepidation, probably preferring that its contents weren't read aloud to the class. As it was, she needn't have worried, he merely incinerated it with a Burning Hex.

He held the charred material in his fingers. "What you just saw was an example of a Burning Hex. It's hard to completely master, hard to control, and hard to block. And you'll be learning all about it, starting next class. Dismissed."

His timing, as always, was impeccable. No sooner had the words left his mouth than the bell rang, and students began shoving books inside bags, cleaning up scraps of parchment, screwing the tops back onto bottles of ink, and gathering up their quills. Harry was midway through that process when Professor Moody called his name. "Potter," he growled. Harry looked up.

"Come to my office straight away, and wait there. There's something I want to show you. Something meant *only* for you." The implications of his emphasis were not lost on Harry.

"Go ahead," he told his friends. "I'll catch up later."

"What do you think Professor Moody wants to show you?" Neville asked. As always, he looked stunned by his own daring. The *nerve* he had to have to participate in a conversation in which he was entirely welcome! Neville didn't have low self-esteem. He had a complete and utter lack of social confidence, and the self-image of a chronic alcoholic. Harry had his work cut out for him if he was ever going to convince the boy he had the potential to be a great wizard, if he worked at it. As long as Neville remained convinced he'd never amount to nothing, he wasn't going to be enthusiastic about working on his spell-casting. He'd look at it as an opportunity to embarrass himself, and politely decline.

For once, address the symptom, and you might beat the whole damn disease.

Harry quickly made his way to the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher's office. The door was ajar, and, interpreting his professor's original instructions, he decided to go inside and wait.

As always, a change in Defense professor had meant a dramatic transformation of the reasonably-sized office. Moody's desk was at the center of a room packed with all manner of Dark Detectors, warning devices, and...wait a second, what was *that*?

Harry made his way over to a cabinet on the far wall. As he did, he nearly slipped and fell as his right trainer suddenly lost its grip on the ground. He looked down. His foot was in a puddle of a clear liquid.

The smell was strangely familiar, although the exact name escaped him. Carefully, he made his way over to the cabinet.

Next to a pocket-sized foe glass was a frame. Stretched across it was a green and tan-striped sheet of some kind of skin. Okay, his first suspicion, that Moody had skinned and tanned the hide of one of the Dark wizards he'd killed as an Auror had been a *bit* unjustified. Moody was known to be ruthless, but then again, so was Daphne, and as far as he knew, she didn't collect the severed heads of the Death Eaters she'd cut down. Considering that she spent so much time trying to bury the memories of her career as an Auror, it was about as likely as Hermione harboring a secret attraction for Ron Weasley. He shivered at *that* thought.

Suddenly he recognized the material he was looking at. Boomslang Skin.

Boomslang Skin. A clear gelatinous liquid on the floor.

Boomslang Skin was one of the most difficult-to-obtain ingredients used for the making of Polyjuice Potion, the same potion he'd discovered Ron Weasley, Dean Thomas, and Penelope Clearwater illegally brewing in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom during his second year. It was a potion used to take on the appearance of another.

For a split second, Harry didn't recognize the significance of these two clues. Then, it hit him, a terrible realization flooding his thoughts and providing the answer to a dozen questions he'd been so desperate to solve.

It was too late. Moody's door swung open, and he'd just drawn his wand when the silent, but powerful Stinging Hex hit the back of his right hand. His subconscious reaction was to spread his fingers, and his wand fell from his grasp. Before it hit the floor, it was Summoned into Moody's left hand. A frighteningly feral grin split his scarred face. "Got you, Potter," he growled. He aimed Harry's wand at the door. "*Collaporatus!*"

The door slammed closed and locked. There were now just two ways to open it. It would have to be canceled by the wizard that cast it, or it would have to be blown into fragments. Without a wand, Harry no

longer had the power to make either one of those possible. A Silencing Charm ensured they would not be overheard. For good measure, Moody snarled, "*Prohibito!*"

Harry, who had been backpedaling slowly after Moody had seized his wand, nearly had his back to the wall of Moody's office. The spell smashed his body against it, holding him fast, like some kind of living wall hanging. He was as helpless as he'd ever been. For the moment, he could still talk. "You aren't Alastor Moody," Harry said.

"Indeed," the faux Moody replied. "I'd intended to remove all suspense letting you figure it out on your own. You don't think I spilled Polyjuice Potion on the floor and left Boomslang Skin in plain sight by *accident*, did you? You're Snape's little *prodigy*, after all." He spat the name with a kind of venom altogether different from the barely-concealed disgust Moody normally used. No, this was outright hatred, bitterness, resentment. Snape had betrayed him, had turned his back on the Death Eaters to spy for the Order. And now he lived comfortable, ensconced safely under Dumbledore's protection, teaching students, with scarcely a care in the world for his own safety.

"Who are you?" Harry asked. He needed to stall for time. Fighting the effects of the Restraining Hex, he managed to rotate the ring on his right hand around the finger, grinding the metal against the stone wall. If Daphne hadn't been alerted to his plight by now, his ring's twin would be practically smoldering. "Where's Moody?"

"He's alive, of course," the imposter said. "Had to keep him alive for this little charade to work. But you shouldn't be concerning yourself with *him*."

The man laughed harshly. "The Dark Lord returned to me, took me away from my bastard of a father. Made him feel the pain of being *controlled*. Something I suppose you are quite familiar with, aren't you, Potter? You threw off that Imperius Curse like it was nothing. We probably even have the same motto: *Never again*. You know what I'm talking about."

Harry's mind was racing, trying to figure out who this man could possibly be. "What do you want with me? Are you going to kill me?"

“Kill you? Of course not. I’m afraid that deed isn’t mine to do. I was allowed to try to end your life only by *indirect* means. I was supposed to test you. If you survived, then my master would know you were *worthy*.”

“Worthy of what?”

“Worthy of his attention, you stupid boy!” faux Moody snarled. “You, the Boy-Who-Lived, a stain upon my House, saved by a combination of nothing more than blind luck, credited with the destruction of *my* master!” he roared. “Oh, the number of times I thought about just cutting you down. Two words,” he said. “But I was forbidden. And I still am. But rest assured, boy, that you’ll wish the Dark Lord had given me permission by the time your pathetic life ends.”

“You were a Slytherin.”

“Of course I was! That was how I learned of the Cause! That was where I met my *true* friends! Where I cast aside my pompous father’s foolish notions and came into my own identity! After you banished my master, we struck at a family of Aurors, Aurors that our master had spoke often of, nearly as often as he spoke your family’s surname. But we were betrayed! I was sent to rot in Azkaban, abandoned by my father, until the day that my dying Mother cracked his stone heart. I thought I’d escaped! But I soon learned to despise the Imperius curse as I never had the Dementors!”

Harry was having trouble breathing. As the imposter’s rage grew, the spell pressed him harder into the door.

“I *thought* I’d succeeded at the first task. Controlling a dragon is no easy feat. I had to abduct one of the Dragon Handlers to learn how it is done. When you were knocked out of your broom, and did not get up, I rejoiced. Harry Potter was *dead*. I had done as my Master had asked.”

“You cele...celebrated too early...” Harry groaned, forcing the words through his constricted windpipe.

“Yes. Yes, I did. You survived, and stunned everyone in attendance by taking down that dragon, then dragging yourself all the way to the nest to recover the egg,” the imposter said.

Suddenly, he remembered something Daphne had told him about Barty Crouch.

The man sold out his own son without blinking, lest he become a political liability. Sent him to Azkaban with nothing more than the show trials that the rest of the imprisoned Death Eaters got. And Crouch wouldn't even provide a bribe for his release...

Bartemius Crouch the Second gnashed his teeth furiously. “Then, I found a plan I thought fool-proof. I cast a Proximity Charm on your wand when it was lying on your desk one day, stole Gillyweed from Snape's office, and created a ball of concentrated Dark Magic. It would be unleashed as soon as you'd entered a given area. But again I was foiled. You approached from a different direction, rescued your hostage, and were able to throw up a shield to protect yourself. All I accomplished was to infuriate an old and influential French family by murdering their youngest daughter. You escaped me *again*.”

He smiled viciously. Harry was grateful that he'd managed to open the floodgates. All of Barty Crouch Jr.'s ranting was buying time for his rescue. The man clearly had a tremendous amount of repressed anger, and he was venting it at his helpless captive. A cruel, feral smile cracked his face. “Not this time. I'm taking matters into *my own hands*, Potter. I will not fail my Master again. I will deal with you myself.”

“So...you *are* going to kill me?” Harry asked. The fear in his voice was real. He doubted many things in his life, but this man's ability and willingness to end his life was not one of them. “You are going to disobey Him?”

“He'll understand,” Crouch Jr. assured him. “He'll reward me handsomely.”

“And if Voldemort doesn't-”

“DO NOT DARE SPEAK HIS NAME! CRUCIO!” Crouch shrieked. Twin blasts of white energy erupted from the two wands in Crouch’s hands.

Harry’s body exploded in agony. He couldn’t hold back a scream as the vicious Cruciatus Curse sent bolts of pain coursing through his body, ripping him apart at a molecular level. His skin burned. His blood boiled. His bones splintered.

Then the door exploded inward with a tremendous BANG, showering both of them with splinters of wood. Harry had never seen anything like the incandescent rage that glowed in Daphne’s eyes. She didn’t even cast a specific spell. She just hurled Moody across the room with a surge of magical energy almost shattered her wand, screaming something entirely incoherent.

The hexes canceled, Harry slumped to the floor, moaning softly.

Dumbledore was through the door an instant, Snape, Flitwick, and McGonagall right behind him. As Daphne drew back her wand for a killing blow, it was ripped out of her hand by the aged wizard. She spun around, eyes blazing with fury.

“Daphne, he has information that could be of great value to us. And I promised you long ago that I would try to save you from yourself. I have failed often in the past. This time, I *will* keep that promise. I will not allow you to kill him, Daphne.”

His guardian closed her eyes, taking deep, calming breaths. When she opened them again, the animal was gone. Her eyes remained hard, though, and fixed on the injured imposter. Then, as if coming out of a trance, she remembered Harry, rushing to his side and nearly knocking over McGonagall in the process. She dropped to one knee in front of him. “*Harry?* Harry, talk to me. Are you alright? Can you *hear me?*”

“I’m just *peachy*, Daph,” Harry groaned. She smiled, relief lighting her features. She helped him to his feet, hovering over him protectively. “You were right about the rings,” he told her. She merely nodded.

Dumbledore had lifted the unconscious imposter to his feet, and sat him in Moody's desk chair, binding his wrists to the arms of the chair. "That's Barty Crouch Jr. using Polyjuice," Harry told them. His declaration silenced the room.

"Are you certain?" Flitwick squeaked.

"Unless someone else has his exact life story, yes. Said he was betrayed by his father and sent to Azkaban after Voldemort's fall for an attack on a family of Aurors. Says his father broke him out, but placed him under the Imperius Curse. His dying mother appealed to her husband's better nature, convinced Crouch Senior to help him escape."

"But Barty Crouch Junior *died* in Azkaban!" McGonagall protested. "It is on *record*. His body was entombed there, with the other deceased inmates."

"Well shall soon know," Dumbledore says. "If Harry is correct, the Polyjuice should be wearing off anytime now."

Sure enough, within a minute, Moody's features began to change. His scarred skin smoothed out and became whole. A real eye grew in the socket holding the electric-blue magical one, popping it out of place. A real human leg took the place of the fake one, sending the wooden replacement clattering to the ground. Chunks of graying hair elongated and matched the color of straw. In less than a minute, the unconscious form of Barty Crouch Junior took the place of the veteran Auror.

Harry's head was throbbing as the Veritaserum-aided interrogation yielded information he already knew, although he did find the particulars of Crouch's escape from Azkaban quite fascinating. But he didn't learn anything groundbreaking until Dumbledore mentioned the senior Crouch.

"Oh, he won't be learning of *anything* anymore, old man. He's *dead*. I tied up that loose end before I went after Potter. I wanted to make sure that at the very least I had my revenge."

Dumbledore's eyes darkened visibly as he heard this. "I have no further use for you. You shall be turned over to the Aurors. Tom Riddle will have to cope-"

At the mention of Voldemort's true name, Crouch went rigid. His eyes rolled back in his head. Blood began seeping from his eye sockets, his nose, his ears. He slumped back in his chair, body wracked by spasms, limbs flailing against his restraints. He was shaking violently. Dumbledore's expression turned to one of horror. Snape drew his wand, a counter-curse on his lips, but it was too late. The last spasm subsided. Crouch's head fell forward onto his chest. He was dead.

A/N: Well, I'd had this chapter written up a while ago, and my Beta flew through it, so I figured I'd just post it ASAP.

Question: Why didn't Barty Crouch Junior just kill Harry and be done with it? Answer: He's deranged. He's really, *really* angry. And like many people that fit those two descriptions, he needed to vent his anger at somebody. That somebody was Harry. He also changed his mind mid-rant, and decided that he wasn't going to risk failing to bring Harry back to Voldemort, which was his mission in the first place. So all of that combined gave Daphne and the others enough time to rescue him. Why Crouch died when he did ought to be rather obvious, but it'll be explained in the next chapter regardless. The reason for Crouch's death is the same as his Kissing was in canon; without him, there is no evidence of Voldemort's return.

Blaise Zabini returns. Hermione's not happy. Neither of those things, especially the latter, should have come as any surprise. Blaise has an important role to play, and I'm pretty confident I can get him to fit into this story without negatively impacting the roles of Harry's other friends. In canon, Harry stuck with the people that he'd known the longest until he was forced to expand his circle of friends in Book 5. That's just sort of happening a bit earlier here, what with the addition of Blaise and Neville.

Harry is in good physical shape. But he's just put his body through a tremendous physical strain, nearly exhausting himself in frigid water, and then running back up to Hogwarts at a sprint to check on Ginny.

I've suffered problems with dehydration and exhaustion before, and though Harry's in better shape than I am, I still think what happened to him was realistic given what he'd just gone through.

Ginny's okay, although it was a close one. That fact is going to weigh on Harry for a while. While GM Harry doesn't possess the same overwhelming sense of guilt when somebody gets hurt and he's in any way, real or imagined to blame, he still has a conscience. Also, Molly Weasley isn't really sure what to think of Harry at this point. To be fair, Harry isn't the kind of model citizen that he is in canon. He's a cunning, occasionally harsh Slytherin who is beginning to rely more and more on Dark Magic; indeed, that seems to be where his strengths lie. As has been well-established by now, being Dark does not in any way make you evil. It does carry additional risks, but that's a given. But it doesn't make you the most attractive boyfriend for Molly Weasley's only daughter either. I had to stick in the delay because I didn't figure Ginny was going to be conscious the day she was injured. Rest assured, the Weasleys came as soon as they could. Arthur got hung up at the Ministry, and Molly wanted both of them to be there. They also expected that Ginny wouldn't be conscious for at least a day. I had no intention of implying they care about Ginny in this series any less than they do in canon, so please don't take it that way.

That said, Ginny's insisting that Harry stay was meant as a bit of a message to her mother. Ginny's a bit more independent than she might have been at this point in canon. She's also considerably more mature. A lot of people wondered how I'd prematurely age Ginny without using her ordeal as Tom's pen-pal. Well, between what she saw in the Forest with Daphne and this, I think she's been through quite a lot. And her world view is dramatically altered. That's part of the reason she and Harry get along so well. She's far more of a realist than Hermione is. But that doesn't mean she'll follow directly in Harry's footsteps. Harry's comfort level with Dark magic isn't the same as Ginny's. After all, she does come from a historically Light family. So does Harry, but that's not the point. He was raised by a woman that was more than willing to use Dark Magic to serve the Light cause. Problem, of course, is that she's a wee bit unbalanced.

This installation of the series is fast drawing to a close. Rowling didn't exactly leave me with much to work with in between the 2nd and 3rd Tasks, and truth be told I want to finish this part of the series ASAP, and get on to Book 5. So there's going to be another one of those big summary chapters coming in the near future.

Finally, if you haven't already noticed, I updated my glossary of curses. With the way my duels tend to be a bit drawn out, I needed some new options. I also came up with a few rather nasty ones.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

I always welcome reader feedback, because it helps me figure out if I've gone too far off track. Positive and negative, I want to hear your thoughts.

Chapter 20: Testing Limits

Daphne had insisted upon taking Harry to the Hospital Wing following his prolonged exposure to Crouch Junior's vicious Cruciatus Curse. Madam Pomfrey had followed that up by insisting he stay in bed for the remainder of the day, at the very least. Although unhappy with her decision, Harry didn't fight it; the Cruciatus Curse worked in part by inflaming pain receptors in the body, which is why prolonged exposure could result in permanent damage to the nervous system, including paralysis and insanity. It also burst blood vessels because it put a tremendous strain on the system. His friends were quickly informed (Ginny had alerted Blaise), and had all visited him to express concerns and relief that he was alright. He'd given them a brief synopsis of what had happened, and filled them in on what he had learned.

Harry had been lying back in his bed, trying to pass the time, when a small barn owl flew through the window, landing on his nightstand. A roll of parchment was tied to its leg. *Could Remus have finally written back?* he wondered.

Hedwig had returned two days after he'd sent her off to find Remus, her legs unencumbered. The owl seemed quite pleased with herself, so Harry assumed that she'd indeed managed to find wherever Remus was hiding, and delivered his letter without incident. That she hadn't come back with a response hadn't shocked him. Just as Harry had found it difficult to write to his old Defense teacher, Remus might have trouble communicating with the boy who was not only an old student, but the only living link to his best friend, James Potter.

Months had passed, and still no reply. Harry had tried to think of some explanations for the lack of a response. It was possible that Remus was angry with him, but that seemed out of character. Remus was a shy, compassionate man who would not attempt to make Harry feel guilty out of bitterness. It was also possible he wasn't available. Dumbledore might have sent him off like he had Daphne, perhaps making early inroads with the werewolves. But such a scenario seemed unlikely, because the werewolves that formed small "packs" tended to avoid normal wizards as much as possible. They'd have no inclination to ally with or against Dumbledore unless they believed

they had to, meaning they would need evidence of Voldemort's return. And since Voldemort hadn't yet come close to regaining his former strength, and remained in hiding, such evidence would be quite difficult to come by.

The last, and most obvious answer, was that Remus simply didn't know how to respond to Harry's overture, and had attempted to put it out of mind. Such procrastination was typical of Remus, according to Daphne. While he always handed in his assignments promptly, he seemed terrified of interacting with others outside of the Marauders, Lily, and Daphne. He made excuses, promised to do something later, argued that it wasn't time for him to act yet. While this kind of social awkwardness had probably lessened with age, Harry wouldn't be in the least surprised if it was still a challenge to communicate with people he didn't know very well. Harry was, unfortunately, one of those people.

Giving the owl a scratch on the head, he sent him on his merry way, lest Madam Pomfrey discover his presence and starting casting Cleaning Charms on everything in sight.

He'd slowly untied the ribbon, and flattened out the parchment. The letter was very long. He quickly recognized Remus's cursive scrawl, a strange combination of the refined and the brutish. Much like Remus himself, Harry knew.

March 10th, 1994

Harry,

I suppose I too should apologize for the delay in responding to your letter. I had my own difficulties trying to put my feelings and thoughts into words. I reckon we're even now.

I am well, Harry, although not entirely at ease or content. Dumbledore asked me to keep a low profile this year, and I have done as he asked. Unfortunately, it means that I am left with very little to do. I had few friends before I came to Hogwarts, and I have made few since I left. Since that avenue is barred to me, I have been a bit frustrated by my social confinement.

None of which explains why it took me so long to respond, of course. Harry, the truth is, I'm trying desperately not to foul up our relationship. It means a great deal to me...and to my other half. And in the process, I've preferred not reaching back and risking what I already have to trying to build on it. But in the end, Harry, I realized that failing to respond to you could only destroy the connections we'd already forged.

I must admit that I am concerned about you safety, Harry. Dumbledore wrote me just before I sent this letter, and explained what happened at the Second Task, as well as relaying some details your encounter with Barty Crouch Jr. It frustrates me that I'm unable to protect you, but I also understand that you don't always want to be protected. You want to be able to stand alone, to be strong in the face of adversity. And you've gone and done just that, despite your age. And I can't help but respect that.

You and James are very different, Harry. But in some ways you are the same. James was a fool as a boy. He grew up spoiled, ignorant, and as immature for his age as it was possible to be. He was also a very gifted individual. Of course, you know all of this already. What I fear you don't fully understand are the good things about James. For one, James was fiercely loyal to his friends. Despite everything that had been given to him, despite all he took for granted, he would defend them. Even Peter. And as he grew, he became less bigheaded, and grew into a good man. He was brave, sometimes even foolhardy. He was daring, a risk-taker, just as you are. But if there was one thing about him that cannot be doubted, it was that he was committed to doing what he believed was right. That it took him a while to understand the difference between right and wrong is unfortunate. But he was admired and loved by everyone in the Order. During the Siege of Hogwarts, James nearly lost his life when he helped rescue two Third Years that were trapped in a collapsing building. Lily and Sirius yelled for him to leave them, but he refused to give up. Both survived, eventually married and had families of their own. Lily was deeply moved by his courage (she also slapped him for nearly getting himself killed,) and I think that's when she decided to give him a chance, because the next time he asked her out, she finally said yes. They'd been on much better terms that entire year, but I think that when Lily saw him perform such a selfless act, it

changed her opinion of him forever. I think comforting that poor first year after he had a nightmare the same night just confirmed what she already knew: James Potter had changed, and changed for the better.

I'm not trying to portray James as a saint, Harry. He most certainly wasn't. But though you pursue your lofty goals using different methods, you both want the same thing. James wanted more than anything for Voldemort to be defeated, for peace to be brought to the Wizarding world. He never once questioned his commitment to the Order, even during its darkest hours. His life revolved around two things: the war and Lily. And, eventually, his infant son.

You are Slytherin. He was Gryffindor. He favored brash, immediate, and decisive action. He always volunteered to lead the charge, to go back for the wounded. You should have seen him the day when Lily was nearly killed by Lucius Malfoy. Daphne was furious, but James was beside himself. More than once, he ran back through heavy spell-fire and rescued wounded comrades or brought back their bodies so their loved ones could grieve properly. He led by example. But you are different, and I understand that well. You favor delayed, careful, yet devastating action. You seek others to help you, to improve your chances of success. You try to understand their motives, their thoughts, so that you can convince them to see things your way. You fight blindly only when you have no other choice.

But that doesn't mean that you should cast aside your father's memory. Perhaps, if Lily and James had lived, you might have been different. But even if you hadn't, even if you were exactly what you are now, your father would have loved you and been proud of you. He would have learned to understand. He might not have always approved, but as long as you were safe, and as long as you thought you were doing the right thing, he would have left you be. There was another incident during the Siege where James ended up screaming at this 5th year Ravenclaw for fleeing and leaving a friend to die. Lily managed to stop him before he scared the poor boy to death, but I think James realized that day that not everyone could be like him. From that day forth, I never saw him call someone a coward. He never questioned a person if they decided to flee rather than fight. Even if he wanted to say something, he stayed silent. He learned his lesson, Harry.

Your mother was one of the most wonderful people I've ever met. She was modest, compassionate to a fault, and a brilliant witch. She accepted my condition without hesitation, and even told me about the ongoing efforts that eventually led to the Wolfsbane Potion. Many people say that she changed James. But I am not one of them. She and James were meant for each other, there is no doubt in my mind. But James had already undergone more than one epiphany. The Siege of Hogwarts changed us all, Harry, but none more than James. He became a man, and accepted the responsibility that goes along with it. Lily would never have accepted the person he was his first six years at Hogwarts. He was the only person she never forgave when he did something truly idiotic in her presence (not that she hadn't given him many chances). I think she fell in love with him at some point, and saw what he would become. And I think she was frustrated with him for wasting that potential.

I realize you didn't ask me to tell you everything you ever wanted to know (and probably more) about your father, but I needed to, regardless. You did ask me about Sirius.

Harry, Sirius and your father, though best friends to the end, were very different people. Sirius grew up in an environment where he was disliked, and the feeling was mutual. His distrust of Dark magic is a result of his family's status as the most prominent Dark family. His outright hatred of Slytherins is a reflection of his brother's placement there, its association with Snape, who taunted him about his rejection from his family, and the fact that most of the Slytherins we worked, ate, and studied with for seven years became Death Eaters, and ended up trying to kill us. Azkaban was not kind to him either. I've exchanged a few short letters with him this year, and I'm concerned about him. He's fixated on you, fixated on your House, and fixated on Daphne. Almost nothing else matters to him. I think he's trying to put his life back together, centered on the things that mean the most to him. He's not doing it well. I think he needs time to accept how things have changed. He feels helpless because he's been rotting in prison while you've grown up. And he isn't sure he likes what you've become. Well, to be blunt, he dislikes what you've become. And the fact that he had no control over that, despite the fact that he was your Godfather and entrusted to take care of you...that bothers him.

Please give him a chance, Harry. He could be a fine friend, and his wand is certainly one you want in a duel. And no matter what he thinks of you, he'll fight by your side whether you ask him to or not. He loves you, Harry. I think that's why he has so much trouble accepting what you are.

As for the rest, as you correctly assumed, I'm not the person to ask when it comes to courting pureblood families. It's an important step, and I'm sure you've been told this before, but don't forget the Muggleborns, or the less prominent Wizarding families. They will be a part of this war, too.

You want to be a leader. You need to be a leader. Is that "normal" for a boy of your age? Of course not. But that doesn't matter. I'll follow you, Harry, no matter what path you chose to walk. I owe you, and I owe your father. And I want to see Voldemort defeated. I don't want the cycle repeated. I don't want the next generation, your children, to have to grow up faster than they should. Maybe the most horrible thing about war is that it is so often fought by those too young to fight it. It seems that this will once again be the case.

I wish you luck, Harry, and I hope that you've learned something you didn't know. You have to understand that it pains those of us that knew and liked James when you speak so poorly of him.

Your friend,

Remus

Harry stared at the signature, trying to process everything that he'd just read. He reread the letter. Once. Twice. Three times.

Guilt threatened to overwhelm him. A part of him wanted to reject what Remus had told him as the ramblings of one of his father's old friend, giving biased accounts that were out of touch with reality. But the rest of him knew that wasn't true.

If Harry was completely honest with himself, he'd never really looked upon James and Lily as his parents. He had so few memories of them that he simply couldn't give them that kind of status, not when he had someone who had performed all the functions of a mother

despite being unrelated to him by blood. And Daphne had also told him little about them. They'd existed as these strange, long-dead entities, canonized by some and cursed by others. Daphne had struggled to overcome the earlier memories of James, and because the memories of James and Lily after Hogwarts were simply too painful to contemplate, he'd never learned the whole story.

Severus Snape hated James Potter. Severus Snape loved Lily Evans. Severus Snape hated Lily Evans for marrying James Potter. Severus Snape had initially hated Harry Potter for being the spawn of the woman he'd loved and the man he'd hated. Severus Snape had initially hated Harry Potter for bringing James Potter into Slytherin House. Severus Snape had grown to respect and maybe even like Harry Potter once he'd stopped looking at him as James Potter reincarnate.

Harry Potter disliked Severus Snape as a person. Harry Potter thought Severus Snape was cruel, vindictive, cold, and never forgot a grudge. Harry Potter thought Severus Snape's behavior toward him for the better part of two years had been simply deplorable. Harry Potter respected Severus Snape as an expert Potions Master, a skilled duelist, and a man well-versed in the Dark Arts and the Dark Lord himself.

Daphne Dressler was Harry Potter's guardian and surrogate mother. Daphne Dressler loved Lily Evans. Daphne Dressler hated James Potter before his 7th year. Daphne Dressler had suffered great, traumatic losses as a teenager. Around the same time, James Potter had become a better person. Daphne Dressler did not like talk about her experiences at Hogwarts or beyond, because they made her think of what she had lost. Daphne Dressler hated Severus Snape because he had attacked Lily Evans and joined the Death Eaters.

Sirius Black hated Dark Magic. Sirius Black hated his parents and brother, and associated Dark Magic with them. Daphne Dressler used Dark Magic. Harry Potter had begun to learn Dark Magic. Sirius Black had loved James and Lily Potter. Sirius Black felt responsible for Harry Potter, their son. Sirius Black disliked Daphne Dressler for encouraging Harry Potter's study of the Dark Arts. Sirius Black hated

Slytherins. Sirius Black was unhappy that his godson, Harry Potter, was a proud and established Slytherin.

Remus Lupin had loved James and Lily Potter, and been close friends with Sirius Black. Remus Lupin also felt an obligation to Harry Potter. Remus Lupin was a far more cerebral man than Sirius Black. Remus Lupin was a werewolf. Remus Lupin disliked what the Marauders had done as young teenagers. Remus Lupin seemed to understand Harry Potter's feelings of loneliness during his First Year. Remus Lupin distrusted Daphne Greengrass because he thought she was unbalanced.

So where does this leave me? Who can I really trust? Everyone has an agenda, a bias. The thoughts and actions of every person are affected by past experiences.

There were no answers to be found. Quite simply, Harry would need to make his own decisions, his own judgments, while also giving fair consideration to what others thought.

But Remus had still struck a chord deep within him. He hadn't given his father's memory the chance that it deserved. He understood that by speaking so poorly of James, he was indirectly antagonizing Sirius, Remus, Dumbledore, even McGonagall.

Harry scanned the letter again. Remus couldn't be lying to him. It would be completely against the man's character. He was showing Harry a side of his father he'd never known. Remus had finally backed up all of the praise with concrete examples, real-life anecdotes from the past. He'd shown that Harry's father was human, but a good man nonetheless. Somehow, that was a tremendous relief to him. It was natural for a boy to want to be proud of his biological parents. Now, maybe he could be. And maybe, based on what Remus had said about his parents' ability to see things differently, to accept or at least not condemn what seemed alien to them, he could assume that they would be *proud* of what he had become, of what he *would* become.

A few tears had tracked down his cheeks, but he fought back the rest. He needed to remain composed. He'd had a breakthrough, and he didn't want his emotions to ruin it.

His glasses slipped off the bridge of his nose. He made a mental note to have Daphne reinforce the Charms she'd been casting on them over a decade, most recently just before the First Task. The first piece of magic was an Unbreakable Charm. Harry's imperfect eyesight could be a serious problem if his glasses were to break at an inopportune moment. The second was a Removable Permanent Sticking Charm. The name itself was, of course, a contradiction. The spell wasn't. It was a remarkable feat of spell-work, a Charm that had been invented by none other than Lily Potter herself, who had developed it her 7th year for the benefit of her boyfriend and future husband, James Potter. It was complex and required extreme precision to cast, which was why he left it to Daphne. When used correctly, it would firmly secure the glasses to the wearer's nose. They would stay in place until the charm was nullified by the touch of the caster or the wearer. That way, Harry could take his glasses off so that he could sleep normally, but he wouldn't lose them, and by consequence his eyesight, in the middle of a duel, Quidditch match, or any other vigorous activity. Hermione had been fascinated by the very idea of creating a new spell. Flitwick had told him privately (and in a subdued tone) that had Lily Potter survived, it wouldn't have been the last original spell she would have invented.

"So what *exactly* did I do wrong?" Blaise asked for the fourth time since they'd left Potions. For the Zabini boy, it had been a rather negative experience. He'd not only fouled up his timing, but he'd panicked and added the ground-up bits of wormwood to the Blackthorn Antidote two steps before it was called for. The result had been a rather explosive reaction between the overheated potion and volatile ingredient, a reaction that would not have occurred if he'd added the two ingredients that together could counter the negative effects of adding the wormwood. Bottom line: a ruined Cauldron, a burn dressing on Blaise's right hand, and a bad bruise on his left arm from where Tracey Davis had punched him. The Serpent's Keeper had suffered burns on her legs after the boiling potion had eaten through her robes.

"Why do you keep asking *me*?" Harry asked. Hermione was off finishing an extra-credit assignment on the history of the Summoning and Banishing Charms for Flitwick, and Ginny was in Herbology.

“Because you’re the little Potions prodigy,” Blaise explained.

“You heard what Professor Snape said,” Harry reminded him.

“Yeah, but considering how angry he was with me, I’m not sure I trust the accuracy of his conclusions.”

“And I’ve already explained it a few times myself.”

“In terms no more specific than the ones he used...minus the invectives, of course. Why are we even brewing these bloody antidotes anyway?”

Harry stopped walking. “Because the Blackthorn Poison is one of the most dangerous in existence? Didn’t you hear about the part where it imitates the common cold, but slowly shuts down the respiratory system? It was a favorite of assassins, because no one recognized that the target had been poisoned until it was too late to do anything.”

“And that’s a good reason for *14-year olds* to be brewing the antidote? In case we just *happen* to be visiting some royalty and they *happened* to be poisoned with Blackthorn and they just *happen* to be crazy enough to let a teenager brew the antidote? Give me a break, Harry! The odds that we’ll ever use 80 percent of what we’ve learned from Snape are virtually nil, unless one of us becomes a Potions Master. And from what you’ve said, you probably aren’t going to be that person.”

Harry couldn’t really argue with Blaise’s logic. If truth be told, he questioned a great deal about the methods and philosophy of magical education at Hogwarts. For the average student, memorization was emphasized. More advanced students could let their curiosity lead them into independent study, which was encouraged by the faculty. But it wasn’t required, or even expected. Some classes, such as Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts, gave students extremely practical knowledge. Professor McGonagall had made a conscious effort to help her pupils understand the significance of what they were doing, as well as *how* the magic worked. But for most students, Potions, Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures, Arithmancy, and Astronomy were more about memorizing the material and regurgitating it when required than understanding the nature of the

magic itself. Harry and Elisha, as advanced students, were expected to do more than just memorize. Snape wanted them to understand how each ingredient interacted with another, and how they affected the whole. But the regular students, like Blaise and Hermione, were merely asked to follow instructions and learn background information.

In short, the inspired students could get quite a lot out of their magical education. The less academically-inclined would get very little practical use out of their years at Hogwarts. It was a system that Harry was sure could be improved. "Stop gutting the messenger," Harry told him. "Forget killing him; you're mutilating the remains."

"Fine. Can you please explain to me what I did wrong? It's not that I don't understand I *did* do something wrong, it's just that I'd like to know what it was so that I don't do it again. I really don't like it when I mess up, Harry," Blaise said.

Harry sighed, and recalled the details of the instructions. "Alright. First, you didn't do a good job regulating the temperature of the water in the cauldron before you started adding ingredients. Even if you *hadn't* blown up the damn thing, the resulting antidote wouldn't have been at all effective. Second, you lost track of time. You had five minutes to let the ground Doxy dropping dissolve – you waited seven. Then, when Tracey saw the antidote was brown and not auburn, you glanced at the instructions, looked to the wrong place, and grabbed a handful of ground Wormwood – compounding the problem by tripling the recommended amount – and just tossed it in there. The Wormwood reacted with the mixture of Doxy Droppings and Flobberworm Mucus. Lots of oxygen bubbles started forming. The antidote boiled out of control, overflowed the cauldron, and splashed you and Davis with superheated, acidic liquid. You jumped away before you were hit with the worst of it. Tracey didn't realize what was happening straightaway and almost fell over backwards. *That* is what happened," Harry finished. He supposed that Hermione would be proud.

"Care to repeat that? I had something in my ear...OW!"

Harry pulled back his fist to punch his new friend again. "You'd better have been listening," he warned.

"Don't worry, I was," Blaise assured him. "Just yanking your chain...no need to cause me physical harm."

"Perhaps," Harry granted. "You do see why Snape was so angry with you, right?"

"Yeah, suppose so. Surprised he didn't take points, really."

Harry flashed him a bitter smile. "Only Slytherin he ever takes points from is me."

"I remember that. I felt sorry for you. You weren't doing much to deserve it," Blaise said.

"Why didn't you do anything?" Harry asked. "Why did it take you so long to decide you wanted to be my friend?"

Blaise looked pained. "Honestly Harry, I came to Hogwarts just not knowing what to expect. I hadn't spent much time with other children my age, and I really wasn't sure who I was or what I was supposed to do. I'm sorry, but I just decided that I'd remain in the background while I tried to answer those questions."

"You don't have to apologize," Harry told him. "I understand. When you are trying to learn to fit in, allying with the least liked boy in the House isn't going to help your cause. You didn't know me, either, so I could hardly expect you to join me for those reasons."

"I tried not to give you a hard time," Blaise said. "I ignored you, mostly."

"I know, I remember. But that's in the past. We all have things we aren't proud of. Maybe that's just one of yours. It's a part of being human," Harry told him. He hadn't intended to upset his friend, just gain a little new information. He realized that in hindsight asking the question the way he did hadn't been the best idea. There was no doubt that Blaise was going to feel guilty about answering it honestly.

"Well, then I guess I'll just try to make it up to you," Blaise said.

“Do what you feel is necessary, Blaise. If that helps you feel better about yourself, and helps me in the process, all the more power to you. You are your own person, and I really don’t like the idea that being *my* friend is some sort of privilege. That’s absurd.”

Blaise nodded, and they resumed walking. Harry was quickly growing to like the boy. Daphne Greengrass had characterized him as “idealistic.” That was indeed the word that most came to mind. But he also brought a different perspective, an open mind. His innocence, as compared to that of the Shadow Trio, as they were unofficially known, was refreshing.

They rounded a corner, and Harry was about to ask Blaise how his Transfiguration essay was coming along, when they came upon a curious sight. Two of their classmates stood near the opposite wall, speaking in hushed tones. Harry recognized them instantly as Theodore Nott and Millicent Bulstrode. They stopped speaking as Harry and Blaise came into view.

Millicent turned away from Nott to face them. Millicent was, to put it politely, heavy-set. Her body type was like that of Ginny’s friend and Slytherin’s ace Beater, Anne Grunitch. Taller than Harry’s teammate, her brown eyes seemed to sink back into her face, and she often looked like she was squinting suspiciously. Her small mouth and thin lips completed her perpetually unhappy expression. Her dark brown hair was cut fairly short, flowing back over and in front of her broad shoulders. She was quiet, almost giving the impression that she was shy, but carried herself with a confidence born of a proper pureblood upbringing. The only people she seemed particularly close to were Tracey Davis and a 5th Year Slytherin boy named Max Fielder, who seemed to be an old family friend.

As they approached, she whispered one last thing in Nott’s ear, and he nodded in agreement. Then she moved to leave, but not before glancing briefly at both of them. “Potter. Zabini.” They nodded back, and she was gone.

“What was that about?” Blaise asked.

“Nothing that concerns you,” Theodore Nott replied in a haughty, dismissive tone.

Nott, next to Giselle Reisor, might have been the most enigmatic of Harry's classmates. Tall and lanky, Nott had a narrow face with beady brown eyes hidden behind wire-frame glasses. His brown hair was worn very short, contrasting with his bushy eyebrows. The effect was that when he looked at him, Harry's eyes were drawn to his. It was slightly unnerving, and Theodore knew it. He was a very student, but with a dark and sarcastic sense of humor. He liked to play games with people, to manipulate them so that he had the advantage. He'd never been Harry's friend, but he hadn't been an enemy either. They'd spoken briefly in the past, but with the understanding that their interaction stopped there. He was also extremely arrogant, and possessed a barely hidden disdain for Muggleborns, Hermione in particular.

"You can't blame us for asking," Harry said. "Millicent rarely talks to anyone, and you keep mostly to yourself. When two of the most secretive members of our class are speaking in hushed whispers, we take note."

Nott shrugged. Then he changed the subject. "And how are you doing, Potter? Still celebrating your defeat of Malfoy?"

"I have to admit the thought still brings a smile to my face, but I've moved past it a bit. After all, I've had some other, more important things on my mind," Harry replied, his tone even. He couldn't be sure if Nott was mocking him or merely satisfying his own curiosity.

"Your tactics were quite impressive, more so than the spells you actually used," Nott admitted. "You definitely knew what Malfoy wanted, and you gave it to him. He wanted to see you on the ground, *beneath* him, at *his* mercy. You wouldn't have taken the chance you did unless you were certain it would work."

"Of course," Harry said. That was mostly true, although he'd had doubts at the moment he'd made the decision. "As for the rest...come off it, Nott, I'm only so advanced when it comes to my repertoire. Besides, I've learned that that strategy can be as important as the spells themselves."

"Perhaps," Nott said. "But I'd recommend you learn a few new ones. The Compression Curse, the Severing Curse, the Demolition Curse,

just to name a few. You're pretty powerful, Potter, but you don't show it with the spells you chose. I even remember a few Stinging Hexes thrown in there. Fine for First Years fooling around, but hardly the weapons of a real duelist."

"You do realize that two of the three curses you just named are highly illegal, right? Especially for underage wizards?" Blaise asked.

Nott didn't even blink. "Your point?" he retorted, a hard edge to his voice. "What the Ministry tells us not to do and what they'll let us get away with are two very different things. Surely *your* family bends the rules a bit. We all do. Just because they'd throw you into Azkaban if you used them on a Ministry Official doesn't mean you shouldn't learn them."

Harry considered that. He had to admit the mysterious Slytherin had a point. Daphne used the Dark Arts with regularity, and had since her parents and brother had been murdered. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Regardless of the way you did it, you certainly didn't pull any punches in humiliating him," Nott said. "Have to admit, I didn't expect you to be so open in that bit about the Mudblood."

Harry's initial reaction was to become angered by the insult. But he quickly determined that Nott was testing him. Though he considered purebloods to be superior, Nott rarely used crude language. "I'd think everyone would understand my feelings about Muggleborns, given my best friend."

"Granted," Nott said. "Still, you won a victory, Potter. The younger students practically worship you now, and you got the others to notice you. You are making a name for yourself. Not necessarily a good one, mind, but you are drawing the attention of others. I suppose that was what you wanted."

"It was," Harry said. "And I wanted to send a message."

"Believe me, you did. Nobody in their right mind is going to mess with Granger again. Or Weasley. I'm also pretty impressed at how you manipulated the law to fit your situation. I suppose that was Granger's work?"

“Partially,” Harry said. “I told her what I wanted to do, and she helped make it possible. She got revenge by facilitating mine.”

“Is there something you want?” Blaise broke in to the conversation, sounding angry. Harry felt a brief flash of irritation, until he considered that he might be missing something. Blaise seemed to actively dislike Theodore, and there might well be a good reason. “Given your surname, it seems a bit surprising that you’d be interested in casual conversation with Harry.”

There was a Nott incarcerated in Azkaban. Harry wasn’t sure of the relation. *Perhaps his father?*

“My *uncle*,” Theodore said, answering Harry’s mental question. “Alexander. My father, Richard, was *not* a follower of the Dark Lord. He felt his methods were far too *extreme*. He’s always believed in working through the system already in place. He felt creating chaos was counter-productive. He was right. In the end, Dark purebloods were set back by the Dark Lord’s defeat.”

Yeah, I read that part of him correctly. Pureblood supremacist all the way.

“What does your father think of me?” Harry asked.

“He’s uncertain, as is most of the pureblood community, on both sides. You have shown power, but you have also shown weakness and vulnerability. You were possessed by some shade of the Dark Lord two years ago, and so on. And winning this Tournament won’t prove anything. Though by surviving as you have, you’ve opened a few eyes. This whole thing has been rather hazardous to your health, hasn’t it, Potter? A bit more than it has been for the other Champions? Any guesses as to why that might be?”

“Plenty,” Harry said, smiling. “None that I’m prepared to share with you, of course.”

“We must all have our secrets,” Nott said, shrugging. “I’m afraid that as much as I’ve enjoyed this little chat, I need to be going.” He nodded to both of them, and then disappeared into the darkness of the dungeons.

"I really, *really* don't like him," Blaise growled.

"How so? You weren't exactly tactful when it came to his family? Did you think he was the son of a Death Eater?"

"No, I knew the details. There's something...*fake* about him. He's not like Greengrass. She's unflappable by nature. Nott seems like he's just playing a role. There appeared to be a good dynamic between you two," he said, sounding suspicious.

"We've talked before," Harry said. "And while I'd hesitate before calling him harmless, I don't think he's dangerous."

"You should. Remember that Boggart?"

Harry frowned at that. A disintegrating Inferius was hardly something the average wizard would consider to be amusing. "That was strange, I'll admit. But it doesn't mean he's evil or anything."

"Still, you shouldn't be so comfortable around him. His father has a reputation as a master of deception. Wouldn't surprise me if the master had an apprentice."

"Like you and your father?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

Blaise sighed. "Yeah, dad's taught me a few things. But you can't just choose to be an Illusionist. That kind of magic is innate. A lot of it is about personality. You have to *want* to disappear. I've always thought that was why Mother chose him. He admired her from afar, didn't try to win her favor with extravagant flattery like her other suitors. It was she who proposed they marry. Guess she got bored of waiting six other times."

Harry smiled at that. "Really?"

Blaise grinned. "Yeah. Didn't quite get down on one knee, but she asked him if he loved her, which he did, and if he wanted to spend the rest of his life by her side.

"He agreed?"

"Well, I'm here, aren't I?" Blaise asked. "Mother is a very interesting woman."

"Believe me, I know," Harry said, remembering meeting her for the first time. "She's intoxicating, almost like a Veela...not in *that* way, don't be daft," he snapped when Blaise mimicked vomiting. "People are just *drawn* to her. It's a weird feeling."

"I suppose I'm used to it," Blaise said. "I love her, but I don't know the feeling you are describing."

"I guess you'd be immune to it," Harry reasoned.

"Speaking of Veela, you *like* that Delacour girl, don't you? Don't you already *have* a girlfriend?" Blaise asked teasingly.

"Is it *that* obvious?" Harry wasn't pleased that his friend had caught on to it.

"It *can* be at times," Blaise admitted.

"I care about Ginny, of course. And I think she's quite pretty. But, I can't help it if I think Fleur's bloody gorgeous. And I'm hardly the only one," Harry protested. This was a conversation he certainly didn't want Ginny to ever learn of.

"I know," Blaise said. "I noticed because I didn't expect you to be so entranced by her. And yeah, she's beautiful, no denying that. Pity about her sister."

Harry tried to push back those memories. "Yeah, pity. No one that young deserves to die."

"*Concentrate*, Miss Granger." "I'm trying, Professor," Hermione growled back for what seemed like the eighth time in the last minute.

They were once again in McGonagall's private quarters in the Gryffindor Dormitory. Hermione's held her wand a few centimeters away from the roaring fire, slightly afraid that the tip might ignite, which would merely complicated her already difficult situation.

“Are we even certain that I’ll be able to exert any control over the flames, Professor?” Hermione asked without turning around.

McGonagall made an impatient noise. “Miss Granger, you must understand that while there are many occurrences of wizards and witches displaying abnormal amounts of power with certain types of spells, every case is different. So I don’t know what to expect in your case. Now, please, try again.”

Hermione sighed and took a deep breath. Then she pushed at the flames, trying to channel the magic through her long vine and dragon-heartstring wand. A small crackle of energy coursed through her, but the flames were unmoved.

Frustration rapidly progressed to anger. Hermione was angry with herself for being unable to make progress when she normally excelled, angry for embarrassing herself in front of Professor McGonagall, angry with her magic for tormenting her with flashes of great potential, but giving her no control of the results, angry with the fire for failing to cooperate...

A burst of white-hot flame erupted from the tip of her wand, burning and blackening the stone fireplace. She jumped back with a yelp, and the fire vanished. “I’m sorry!” she blurted. “I just got...I lost control,” she said, turning to face her Head of House. “I won’t let it happen again.”

“What were you feeling at that moment?” the older woman asked.

“Anger,” Hermione replied. “I was angry.”

“Interesting. The first time your abilities manifested, you were angry with Mr. Potter, weren’t you?”

Hermione fought back her memories of the moment when she’d nearly reduced her best friend to a blackened crisp, and silently nodded.

McGonagall’s brow furrowed in concentration. Then she seemed to make a decision. “Miss Granger, please put away your wand.”

“Professor?” Hermione asked. “I thought you said you didn’t think I could do wandless magic?”

“I’m not sure about that, Miss Granger. Now, please, do as I ask.”

Hermione did, then looked at her expectantly.

“Please reach your right hand into the fire.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “What?”

“You heard me, Miss Granger,” McGonagall said, her expression unyielding. Indeed she had. She wasn’t sure if she believed it, though. Taking a deep breath, she slowly reached a bare hand out into the flames. She braced herself for the searing pain, for the smell of burnt flesh...but she felt nothing.

She reached farther into the flames, letting them creep up her arm, even reaching the sleeves of her robes. But her robes did not ignite, and her arm remained unharmed. She turned to face her Head of House.

“Interesting. Look closely at the flames, Miss Granger. Look closely at your arm, and tell me what you see.”

She did. And then she saw it. “There’s a gap between the flames and my skin. It’s like I’m pushing the fire back. And I don’t feel the heat either.” Hermione frowned. “Could that be explained as just an incidence of accidental magic? My body’s just protecting itself.”

“Accidental magic, as you are no doubt aware, is unique in that the user has little or no control of it. It is activated by strong emotions, be they anger or fear. No, this reaction is far too controlled to be explained that way,” McGonagall said. “I must admit I was a bit hesitant to ask you to do that. It was possible you’d be badly burned, though I found it unlikely. You see, Miss Granger, one thing that I have never had the slightest success doing is Transfiguring myself. I am an Animagus, of course, and can take another form, but that is a full-body change. I could change your arms into wings if I wished, but I cannot do the same to myself.”

"You think that your magic has a built-in safeguard, so that you don't accidentally hurt yourself?" Hermione asked.

"Exactly. And I suspected the same with you. I would never hurt you intentionally, Hermione. It makes sense that if you were able to wield fire, you would somehow be able to protect yourself from harm by it." McGonagall looked puzzled. "Miss Granger, I wouldn't normally do this, but I'd like you to imagine that you were involved in a life-or-death struggle, a combat situation. Considering your friendship with Mister Potter, it seems logical that you will face one sooner or later." A bit of strain showed in the elderly woman's face as she said this. "How could you use your abilities to your advantage?"

"Professor, it'd be rather difficult if I couldn't control when I used them. And I don't know what I'm capable of. Is it simply that my Burning Hexes might be more powerful than average? Or it is something else?" Hermione asked.

"You have a tendency to over think things, Miss Granger," McGonagall reminded her.

"With all due respect, I can't really answer that question, Professor," Hermione said. "Is there any literature on the uses of fire in duels that I might be able to read? Maybe I could find some ideas there."

"I will try to locate some for you," McGonagall said. "But I wonder if perhaps I was wrong about your use of wandless magic...Miss Granger, one of the first spells that you learned as a wizard was the Bluebell Fire Charm, correct?"

She nodded.

"It's a rather creative piece of magic, developed by one of Professor Flitwick's predecessors. It creates an undying magical flame that, although limited in scope, can be used to light a lantern or create a portable heat source."

Hermione nodded again. "I read about it towards the end of our First Year Charms text. We never got to study it in class, but it was one of the first things I attempted when I got to Hogwarts. It was also the first spell I ever used correctly." She remembered that moment, alone in

the Gryffindor Common Room two nights after her Sorting, realizing for the first time that this was no dream, that she really was a witch, and that she really could do magic. It had been a tremendous boon to her self-confidence.

"I'd like you to hold out your hand and try to use that spell."

"Wandlessly?" Hermione asked, nervously.

"Wandlessly," McGonagall repeated.

Hermione closed her eyes, steadied her breathing, and focused on an image of the Bluebell Flames dancing on her palm. The knowledge that they couldn't harm her was quite reassuring. She opened her eyes, ready to speak the words...and stared in amazement at her hand. A blue-tinged flame sat on her open palm, radiating a gentle heat. It seemed to hover a centimeter above her flesh. She again closed her eyes, and imagined it doubling in size. When she opened them, it had done just that. Her flesh remained unharmed. She turned her hand over, and the flames flicked a bit, but now sat above the back of her hand. "Wow," she managed.

McGonagall was smiling. "It seems you've had a breakthrough."

"I hadn't even thought I'd cast the spell," Hermione said. "I was just preparing myself, and I thought about what to do and then...it happened. Is this normal?"

Her question caused a very unusual event to transpire: McGonagall laughed. "Of course not, Miss Granger," she said finally. "But in the Wizarding world, what is normal? Can you make the flames go away? Keep your eyes open this time."

Hermione did, staring at the flames, which had taken the shape of the flower from which the spell got its name. In her mind, she saw the flames shrink and fade. At the same time, her eyes witnessed the same event. In seconds her hand was once again naked to the air. She grinned widely. "Is that it, then? Is the key wandless magic?"

"Perhaps," McGonagall said. "It's a start, nonetheless. I think we'll leave it at that. I will try to find some reading material for you, and we

can experiment to see what kinds of limits exist on your power. I hope that I don't need to drag you in here again. Would you agree to come on your own next week?"

Hermione nodded. The progress she'd made gave her renewed hope that she'd yet uncover the secret to her abilities. "Thank you, Professor."

"You're very welcome, Miss Granger. Now go on, I'm sure your friends will want to hear all about what you've learned."

Harry stared out over the Quidditch Pitch...well, what used to be the Quidditch Pitch. Instead, the huge arena had been converted into some sort of massive magical hedge maze. Harry, Cedric, Fleur, and Krum had assembled on a hill overlooking the pitch, and were now waiting for further instruction. He was about to turn to Cedric to say something when Bagman came huffing into view, his round face red with exertion. "Good evening to all of you!" he said brightly. "So, by now you've all seen what we've done with the Pitch, and your challenge should be quite clear. You are to brave the perils of the maze to reach the center, where the Tri-Wizard Cup will be placed. The first of you to reach the Cup will be the winner of the Tournament!"

Bagman's enthusiasm wasn't exactly matched by the four young people he addressed. Harry was focused on his preparations. Cedric looked to be examining the maze in more detail. Fleur seemed to somewhere else entirely, and her melancholy demeanor illustrated exactly where that was. Krum looked distracted as well.

"At the moment," Bagman continued, "The standings are as follows. Cedric Diggory leads with 17 points, Harry Potter is next with 16 points, Viktor Krum is in third with 10 points, and Fleur Delacour is fourth with 8 points. The first of you to touch the Cup will get the full 10 points, and, because of the scoring situation, win the Tournament."

"So there are no points for finishing second?" Cedric asked.

Bagman shook his head. "Normally, there would be, but we want to ensure that every champion has a chance to win...especially given

the tragic events of the Second Task.” Fleur didn’t even blink. While she was physically present, she might as well have not been there. “This Tournament was conceived as a vessel of international magical cooperation, and as an enjoyable learning experience for students.”

There were no objections. Although the altered scoring rules essentially rendered their previous trials almost meaningless, Harry had to admit that not only would the champions be motivated, but the students from each school would all have something to cheer for. Bagman and the other judges had probably done the right thing. Cedric wasn’t happy, and it was perfectly understandable. Given his lead, with regular scoring rules, he might have been able to finish second or even third and still win the Cup, and with it bring long-awaited glory to Hufflepuff House. Now, he’d have to reach the Cup first, or he would go home empty-handed. Cedric had been the most consistent of them thus far, earning good marks on both of the first two tasks. Harry had been penalized for the failure of his original strategy in the first task, and the fact that he returned outside the hour time limit in the second. His performance had been salvaged both times because the judges had been impressed with his simple ability to stay alive. Krum and Fleur had each failed to complete one of the tasks, though Fleur had lost a lot more than points that day. Krum’s excellent showing in the Second Task had put him ahead of the Delacour girl, who had met the challenge of the First Task, but hardly done so in an impressive fashion. She’d nearly been incinerated. Again, though, Harry suspected that far more lasting things were on her mind. Like the fact that her baby sister wasn’t going to be there to cheer her on.

Content with their response, Bagman quickly departed. The man seemed somewhat hurried of late, glancing over his shoulder at odd times, as if he was running from something...or someone. Bagman had a reputation as a gambler, so perhaps that explained his behavior. He’d also been the most generous in his scoring of Harry. From the ratings alone, one might conclude that Bagman was close to him, rather than Daphne, who had graded him harshly, as he’d expected. The Tournament wasn’t all that important for either of them. Daphne was concerned about her reputation as well as with keeping her ward’s ego in check, and Harry just wanted to survive and maybe

impress a few people along the way. He wasn't sure if he'd accomplished the latter or not.

Fleur was the first to leave, slowly wandering back toward the field where the Beauxbatons carriage waited. Cedric followed her, taking several more glances back at the transformed Quidditch Pitch. He nodded at Harry as he left, and Harry returned it. Once he was gone, The-Boy-Who-Lived and the Bulgarian Seeker were left alone on the hill. Krum finally broke the silence. "How is your girlfriend?"

"She's fine, I guess," Harry replied. "She's healed physically, although she's still a little weak."

"I have trouble believing the ease with which this Death Eater impersonated a professor," Krum said, sounding a bit angry. "He is dead?"

Harry nodded. "Some sort of fail-safe toxin in his system. Professor Snape explained it to me in brief. He said that the poison was bound with some extremely complicated Dark magic. It had two triggers, which had to both be activated at the same time. First, Crouch had to be under a great deal of stress. Second, someone had to say the words 'Tom Riddle.' That activated the toxin."

"There was nothing Snape could do?"

"No. The poison was a corrosive agent that spread rapidly through the bloodstream. It burst blood vessels, dissolved the brain tissue...really, really nasty stuff," Harry concluded. Snape had given him the full run-down in graphic detail. Harry had gotten the sense that he was impressed by the poison's lethality. The toxin acted so fast and attacked so many parts of the body that there was no way to stop it, even if Snape had had an enormous store of antidotes and Healing Potions at his disposal.

"Indeed," Krum grunted. "The Dark Lord is not kind to those that fail him."

"It's too bad, really," Harry said. "We could have gleaned a lot of information from him. Now we're blind again." Well, that wasn't exactly true, but Krum didn't need to know that. He sympathized with

him, liked him, maybe even trusted him, but he was not best mates with the older boy. There was a limit to what he would share. "You know what this means, don't you?"

"That the Dark Lord has returned? Perhaps," Krum said. "I would need to see more evidence. As I've told you, his downfall was celebrated, even in Bulgaria. It is difficult to accept that we were all wrong and that thirteen years later he has returned. I mean no offense, of course."

"None taken," Harry assured him. Krum's skepticism was to be expected. He was intelligent, shrewd, and a fast learner, but living so far away from Voldemort's old stomping grounds, the Dark Lord's reign must have felt to him like some kind of story made up to scare children. The First Wizarding War, as Harry now called it, had not touched much of Eastern Europe. This time, that might change. Voldemort was also a quick learner, a cunning magical genius that learned from his mistakes. Failing to recruit on the continent had been one of them. And from what Daphne had told him, Voldemort would have found many eager volunteers. "You don't seem quite as intimidated by the possibility as others, especially those from Britain, might be."

Krum's answer all but confirmed Harry's hypothesis. "The Dark Lord is hardly a threat to my country, my people. His interests lie in Britain. There are many powerful Dark families in Bulgaria and the rest of the Balkans. Dark wizards that are accustomed to autonomy. He would not be wise to interfere there."

"Do you really believe he'll stop with Wizarding Britain?" Harry asked, incredulous. "The man's a psychopath, a power-hungry maniac who happens to be a magical genius. He wants power, he wants control. If he knocks out our Ministry, I see no reason he wouldn't reach into the continent. Perhaps even to Bulgaria."

"Perhaps," Krum replied again. Harry had to conceal his irritation. Either Krum was being deliberately noncommittal, or he truly believed that Voldemort was not his problem.

"So you wouldn't help us if we asked for it? If we needed you?" Harry asked. "You'd abandon us because he isn't your problem?"

“Is it wise to become involved in a conflict that you don’t need to fight? To draw unnecessary attention to yourself?” Krum asked. “If we are threatened, we will fight. We will not submit. But we will not stick our necks out so that our heads may be cut off.” Krum’s English was quite good, despite the heavy accent. Clearly, he was more comfortable in this conversation than he had been in their earlier encounters. Considering how fast a learner he was, that he’d picked up the nuances of the English language so quickly shouldn’t have come as a surprise.

“You’re wrong,” Harry warned. “This is going to be bigger, more destructive. If you don’t help us stop him here, you will pay the price.”

“Potter, I have yet to see evidence that the Dark Lord has truly returned,” Krum protested. “I cannot commit myself, my family, or my family’s allies to a fight that may not actually happen, against an enemy who may or may not exist. This conversation is purely academic.”

Harry wanted to say something, but refrained. As much as he thought Krum was being foolish and stubborn, angering him or insulting him would not improve the situation. “Very well. But don’t let the memory of Gabrielle’s death fade from your memory. She was merely the first of many.”

“We shall see,” Krum said. With that, he left, leaving Harry standing alone. The enormity of his task had just become terribly apparent. It was easy enough convincing those who wanted to fight to join him. But what about those that preferred to stand pat?

Sparks and chips of stone flew as Harry’s curses ripped into a series of dummies provided by the room of requirement. Slicing Curses, Blasting Hexes, Burning Hexes, Striking Hexes, Bludgeoning Curses...Harry was throwing his entire repertoire at the endless supply of targets. Jets and flashes of colored light arced through the air, a kaleidoscope of bright colors.

Harry was just working with what he already knew. He was fully aware that he needed to learn more, to take Nott’s advice and explore some of the “illegal” curses. What good was his power if he stuck to basic dueling spells? He’d had difficulty overcoming Draco,

and had proven unable to overpower him. Winning with shrewd tactics against an inexperienced opponent was all well and good, but he'd be ill-prepared to confront a more skilled enemy.

That said, his Slicing Curse was a legitimate weapon. It carried the physical impact of a strong Striking Curse in addition to a fierce cutting action. He'd have Daphne teach him the Severing Curse over the summer, if he hadn't already mastered it in time for the Third Task. Maybe he'd even ask Snape about the Slashing Curse that the man had invented and used to great effect as a Death Eater. It would be an interesting test to see how far the man's loyalty and faith in him went. Tonks' favorite, the Fire Whip Curse, would be an entirely different kind of weapon for him. And he could probably progress beyond basic defensive spells, and move on to the energy-absorbing Servos Shield.

Harry turned and took four steps toward the back of the room. Then he pivoted, drew his wand back toward his chest, and flicked it at the target. "Confrigo!"

The target exploded, shattering into thousands of small pieces of stone. He grinned, panting heavily. It had been his first attempt at the Demolition Curse, and it hadn't been a bad one at that. Twice or three times as powerful as the Reductor Blasting Hex, the Demolition Curse didn't knock holes in things – it simply blew them to pieces. Used against a human, it would shatter bones. It could even kill if aimed at the head or chest.

It was one of many Darker versions of spells he was already quite familiar with. He was proficient with the Bone-Breaking Hex, for example. Next up was the far more devastating and powerful Bone-Shattering Curse, which left flesh unharmed but had the same effect on bones as the Demolition curse he'd just used to obliterate the target statue.

There was one other thing he needed to work on: silent spell-casting. And that was one area where he'd had little success. Draco had nearly beaten him in the duel because Harry hadn't been able to anticipate the boy's curses in time to throw up a shield. Harry had used silent curses in the Lake to fend off the merpeople, but he'd had

adrenaline flowing through his system, his emotions feeding the power of his magic. It was also possible the Gillyweed compensated for the inability to speak underwater by boosting the power of silent spells. As Neville had explained many times, Gillyweed was a magical plant that in some ways remained a mystery to Herbologists. How it worked, exactly what it did, what kind of magic it possessed – these things were the subject of much debate and conjecture.

“Remind me never to get on your bad side.” The familiar voice came from behind him. Once again, she’d managed to slip in without him noticing.

He turned to face his girlfriend. Ginny gave him a puzzled look, surveying the devastation. “Angry about something?”

“Lots of things,” Harry said. He realized that he was breathing heavily. The last burst of curses had taken a lot out of him, although he still felt capable of doing it again. That was good; it meant his endurance was improving.

Ginny came closer. She wore her fire-red hair down today, letting it fall over her shoulders. “Want to talk about it?”

“Not really,” Harry admitted. “I’d rather not think about it at all.”

Ginny seemed to make the decision not to push him. “Well, the least you can do is give the poor Room of Requirement a chance to repair all the damage you’ve done.”

Harry grinned at that. “Yeah, maybe I ought to take a break.” A thought later, a comfortable green armchair had appeared a short distance away. Harry sat down, and called Ginny over to him. She sat on his lap, leaning against his shoulder, sighing contently.

“Got full marks on my last essay for McGonagall. Thanks for the help on that,” Ginny said.

“Hermione should get credit too. She figured out how to put my ideas into coherent sentences. And you came up with quite a bit on your own.”

"I know," Ginny said. "Mum's really proud of how well I've been doing."

"Well, you are quite brilliant, you know?" Harry told her.

"Maybe that's a stretch," Ginny said.

"You work hard, you think outside the box, and you know when to seek help. You also don't let us do the work for you. Hermione and I are just like a couple of extra textbooks."

Ginny chuckled. "Well, in that case, I don't think I've ever had a textbook that was also such a good *pillow*." She turned her head to look up at him, the smile on her face fading a bit. "What's wrong, Harry?"

"Krum."

"That's specific." Typical Ginny. "Hermione?"

Harry shook his head. "Krum seems to actually believe that Voldemort might be on the verge of returning, but he doesn't think it's his problem. He's damn near convinced that the war isn't his problem. He's *wrong*."

"Is he? Bulgaria's pretty far away. And You-Know-Who didn't really do that much in Eastern Europe last time, did he?" Ginny asked. Though she'd long since stopped shuddering at the name of the Dark Lord, her own use of the name was inconsistent.

"That's basically what he said."

"And you think he's wrong?"

"Yes."

"*Why?*"

Harry sighed. "Because Voldemort learns from his mistakes. He's no idiot, Ginny. Maybe he's mad; maybe he's power hungry, maybe he's

inhuman and cruel. But he's a brilliant and powerful wizard. A master of psychological warfare, for one."

"So? I'm not saying that isn't true, but did he really have the resources to fight on the continent last time? And even if he does this time, which I assume you think is the case, why would extending his operations into the continent, never mind as far as Bulgaria, be of any real benefit for him?"

"You know, you understand this whole thing a lot more than anybody else understands," Harry said. Maybe she was wrong about a few things, but he was fairly certain her parents and brothers wouldn't be pleased to hear the contents of this conversation. Molly Weasley would be appalled.

She shrugged against him, smiling. Their faces were centimeters from each other, but this kind of physical closeness that might have been horribly embarrassing for both of them in years past had become natural. Harry had yet to find a person that understood the way he thought better than Ginny. He wasn't sure he ever would. He trusted her absolutely. The latter could also be said of Hermione, but not the former. Hermione seemed to have difficulty reconciling her more positive view of view of human nature, authority, and society that she'd held before coming to Hogwarts with Harry's political realism and cynicism. They'd always have differences on certain philosophical issues. But Ginny thought the way he did. She didn't always agree with him, but that was healthy. She could play Devil's advocate when she needed to, but back him up when he was right. He'd been a fool to believe that this relationship might be an unneeded distraction. He'd gained more than he could have possibly imagined.

They'd set limits, yes. Both recognized that given the situation, they couldn't afford to make certain mistakes. Besides, they were both still quite young. Physical closeness didn't have to involve constant snogging. The mere presence of the other was often enough. What they were doing at the moment, with Ginny relaxing against his muscled chest, was more than enough. There was a certain innocence to their relationship that seemed to fly in the face of both of their personalities. Of course he *thought* about other things, but...

Did he love Ginny? He didn't know. He certainly didn't want to tell her that when he wasn't certain what love really felt like. They both agreed that this relationship couldn't be allowed to destroy their friendship if it went bad. If it wasn't working, they'd break it off. They'd stop before they did too much damage. Maybe there would be some awkwardness, but they could still enjoy each other's company.

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

Ginny's face was set and determined. She wanted him to listen, and to take what she was saying with the seriousness it deserved. "There's only so much you can do at this point. You've made some progress with Aiden Greengrass and this Ivanov family, you've impressed all of the younger Slytherins and caught the attention of the older ones, and you've made some inroads with Cedric...that's quite a bit accomplished in less than a year, especially considering that you've also had this little Triwizard Tournament hanging over your head. Relax, Harry. Things may well start to happen on their own. It's just up to you to recognize when it's happening and take advantage of it." She paused, thinking. "It's like...it's like trying to push a big boulder that's stuck in the ground instead of just trying to change the direction of a boulder that's already moving. I guess...you wait for your boulders to start moving, and then you act."

"You think that up all on your own?"

"No. I took it verbatim from a book on philosophy in the Library."

"I always knew you were a no-good cheater."

Ginny scowled at him. "Just kidding, Ginny."

She smiled lazily. "I know. Seriously, though I guess...I guess that was a bit of wisdom from Dad, Mum, and maybe my own intuition just folded into one package."

"You are brilliant, you know."

"Stop it."

"Why should I stop speaking the truth?"

"Because...because we're Slytherins, and we never tell the whole truth."

"Get that from Snape?"

"Shut up."

A/N: Well, another one of those somewhat-disliked build-up chapters. They are a necessary evil, providing an opportunity for character development, introduction of new characters, and resolutions to sub-plots. Next up in the 3rd Task, which I promise you is plenty changed and plenty action-packed. It also features a critical development for a bizarre character that some of you really like and some of you aren't that fond of. I'm talking about Luna, of course.

Snape is also going to get a chance to narrate about half of a chapter in the near future too.

You can see the value of Harry and Blaise's friendship here. There are certain things, like Harry's attraction to Fleur, that he just can't discuss with the girls. As two guys, they can joke about it. Blaise has a certain innocence that sets him apart from Harry's other friends. Some of my character's don't like that aspect of his personality, but it's not going to change without reason. So it's logical he doesn't possess the maturity of Harry and Hermione and to a lesser extent Ginny because he hasn't gone through that much. He's going to have some important moments in the future, though.

You also got a look at Harry and Ginny's relationship. And it's one that is really much more emotional than it is physical. Harry needs someone that can understand him and push him away from his more grandiose and misguided schemes. I'm going to be rather blunt here: despite the fact that the characters are getting to the age where I'd think wizarding children would start to become sexually active, I'm not going to be writing a lot of sex scenes. Many authors successfully push romance to the forefront and still write amazing fictions, but it's just not a feature of this series or my writing style. Same goes for the adults. With everything that's going on, the main characters aren't

going to have all that much time to think about sex and romance anyway. Maybe they'll be more of it in the future, but at this point, the innocence of Harry and Ginny's relationship is a welcome distraction from the heavy angst of the rest of the series.

On that note, a number of my writers have been a bit put-off by the darkness of this series. Some of you seem to think I enjoy torturing the main characters. Well, maybe it does make compelling writing, but I wouldn't say that's true. The reality is that war is ugly, and children fighting war is even uglier. I'll try to balance lighter moments with the darker ones, but there's only so much I can do. The Graveyard scene, which is already written, is the most intense and probably the darkest chapter I've written yet, and that *includes* Deadly Waters (GMDR) and Atonement (GMSoD). This is Harry's descent into the depths of Hell, and it's going to change him.

McGonagall cares deeply about her students, Hermione foremost among them. Indeed, the two characters are very similiar, which makes writing the interaction between them very interesting. She'd never hurt Hermione intentionally. Just wanted to head off any accusations to the contrary. She's a caring, compassionate woman, though she hides it behind a formal facade.

Remus returns (in letter form). And he makes Harry think about his father in a way he never has. Remus is an extremely important link to the past, and has a role to play in the present and future. He's a moderator of sorts.

Harry runs into a roadblock with Krum, and he's frustrated by that. He also finds he's got a long way still to go with his Slytherin Housemates. Or not, as you'll see next chappie, with the introduction of another interesting character. Ginny helps him get over it by focusing his attention on how much he's already done.

Okay, one last thing. I really, REALLY appreciate it when people take the time to leave a review. I sometimes lose track with reality, and you readers help pull me back. I really can't do that without your help. If you have concerns or questions of any kind, feel free to leave a review, and I'll try to address them. Forgive me if my responses seem heavy-handed; I don't intend it to be that way and I don't mean to

insult any one. Unlike Harry at times, I realize that I'm not always right in my assessments and depictions. So I can use any help you can offer.

Chapter 21: Hero's Trial

"What do you know about Durmstrang?"

Harry's question seemed to catch Hermione off guard. He, Ginny, Hermione, Neville, and Blaise were all gathered in a corner of the Library, working on that week's homework assignments. The tension between Harry's long-time friend and the Slytherin newcomer was palpable. Hermione had kept glancing at him over the top of her books, which caused Blaise to smile whenever he caught her at it. The Slytherin boy seemed to be getting on quite well with Ginny, and even Neville didn't seem to mind his presence. But Hermione could barely tolerate him.

Ginny, who had been sitting on the floor leaning against her boyfriend's legs, dropped the Transfiguration text she had been reading into her lap and stared up at him curiously. They hadn't talked all that much about Krum since that time in the Room of Requirement.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked. "I'd expect I wouldn't know any more than you did."

"I'm not saying I haven't done my research, I'm just interested to know what you think of it," Harry replied.

"I'm sure *Blaise* might be able to better answer your question," Hermione said.

Yeah, she really doesn't like him, Harry thought. For his part, the black boy straightened, but didn't say anything.

"I asked *you*," Harry said. "You read that book, right?"

"*An Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe*," Hermione said, using her 'bossy' voice. "Yes, I read it."

"And?"

Hermione sighed. "Despite the fact that both are located in cold climates, Durmstrang and Hogwarts are quite different. Whereas

Hogwarts has always focused on students achieving a theoretical understanding of basic magic, Durmstrang is more focused on practical applications. For example, dueling is a required course for students from the beginning of 5th year. They have a reputation of being quite friendly to the Dark Arts, even going so far as to teach them and encourage independent study. Discipline is harsh, and proper behavior and respect of authority is emphasized. It's almost like an old-style Muggle military academy in that sense. Physical fitness is also pushed."

She said this in the same matter-of-fact tone that implied she knew the subject by heart and had absolute confidence in her assessment. In other words, she sounded like a textbook. But Hermione never just memorized the words of the books she read. She somehow managed to synthesize them and spit them out again in her own formal language. "Are you thinking about transferring?"

Ginny stiffened for a moment, surprising Harry. "Of course not," he said quickly. "Don't be daft."

"Did I pass your test? Do I get full marks?"

"Merlin, Granger, you ought to be a little less rude to your supposed best friend," Blaise finally interjected, a bit of anger in his voice. Predictably, Hermione shot a glare at him. What was surprising was the person that spoke after him.

"He's right, Hermione," Neville said quietly. "He was just asking your opinion. He wasn't being insulting." His nervousness grew as silence followed his statement.

Hermione bit her lip, but stayed quiet.

Ginny glanced up at him again, head leaning back so that she was practically staring at him upside-down. "Why were you asking anyway?"

"Because I was trying to get a different perspective on the school. I agree with most of what Hermione said, even the comparison to a military academy."

"Didn't I tell you that there was only so much you could do?" Ginny asked him, her voice barely audible.

"I'm not thinking about *that*. I'm just trying to understand where he comes from, that's all," Harry said, feigning innocence. The truth was that Krum's rejection of his overture was eating at him.

"They strike me as a rather cold lot," Neville said softly. Harry was pleased by how much Neville had begun actually speaking aloud in their presence. They'd practically *dragged* him here, but he was getting more comfortable. "Especially Headmaster Karkaroff. Is it true what they say about him?" Neville sounded anxious.

"Yeah, he was a Death Eater," Blaise said. "A coward, too. Got himself captured by the Ministry and escaped Azkaban by spilling his guts to the

Ministry."

"His testimony helped the Aurors catch the people who *hurt my parents!*" Neville blurted. "Maybe he's a coward, but they might have gotten away if not for him!"

All four of them stared at the slightly pudgy Gryffindor, who had gone deathly pale. It was clear he hadn't wanted that to come out.

"I thought you didn't *know* he was a Death Eater?" Harry asked.

Neville looked down. "I didn't. But Gran said that one of the ones they captured sang like a canary, and eventually let slip information that help them find the safe house where the Lestranges were hiding."

"And Crouch," Ginny added.

Now the eyes of four people fell on her, including Harry, who looked down on her in confusion and surprise. "Hey, I read the *Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*...well, I skimmed it," she admitted, going a bit red. "There's a bit about the Lestranges, and about...you know..." Her voice had gone quiet by the time she finished.

The attack on the Longbottoms hadn't been the worst of the whole war. Indeed, there was great debate to this day as to which had been the most brutal and cruel. Harry believed it had been the raid on O'Connor Sanctuary. Daphne had done her best to prevent him from learning the details, but the memory of the O'Connors' bodies had reportedly caused hardened veterans to shudder with fear and revulsion decades after the fact.

There had also been the murder of Molly Weasley's brothers Gideon and Fabian. They had been key members of the Order, and their bodies had been discovered hanging upside down in one of the Order's safehouses, showing signs of torture, intense battle, and post-mortem mutilation. The McKinnons had been captured after a fierce duel, been bound, tortured, and had their throats slit, left to bleed out as the *alleged* perpetrators, Lucius Malfoy and Thomas Avery escaped. Both were free men, having paid out the Ministry and claimed they had been placed under the Imperius Curse. Six young Muggleborn witches had been brutalized and murdered after the Auror protecting them had proven to be an agent of Voldemort. The details had actually been held from the press, out of respect for the families. Dozens of individuals had suffered horribly in the captivity of the Dark Lord. Some were still in the Permanent Ward of St. Mungo's. Most were dead, mainly by their own hand. A half-blood wizard and classmate of Tom Riddle had been forced to watch as his wife and two daughters, thirteen and fifteen, were raped and tortured to death, before he himself was executed. The list of atrocities went on and on. Edgar Bones and his wife and brother had gotten off relatively easily, both killed in their bed by Killing Curses. Most of the perpetrators had been killed by the increasingly desperate Aurors and sometimes equally psychopathic Hit-Wizards, though some had survived and been shipped to Azkaban. But the creativity shown by the McCourns had put them over the top as far as Harry was concerned.

"Harry, are you alright?" That was Hermione, and the concern in her voice was real.

"Fine," Harry said quickly, aware that everyone was staring at him in concern. His throat was dry, and he coughed. "Just let my thoughts run away from me. Thanks for asking."

"No problem," she said. They exchanged a significant look, the meaning of which could only be understood by those that had suffered together as they had. Blaise and Neville looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"He tortured you too, didn't he?" Neville asked, his face pale. "We weren't told anything specific, but you spent some time in the Hospital Wing a while back, around the same time that the real Moody was rescued."

"Just in case you were wondering, don't let somebody else use a curse that nasty with *two* wands," Harry remarked, trying to lighten the conversation. Nobody laughed at his clumsy effort. Neville paled even more. Harry didn't like to talk about his most terrible and terrifying experiences with others. Somehow, it betrayed a weakness he didn't want out in the open.

"It's *hardly* a joking matter, Harry," Hermione whispered. "You could have been badly hurt, or worse."

Neville looked like he was going to be sick. It was time to change the subject. "I wonder what kind of stuff I'm going to be up against in the hedge maze," Harry commented.

The others blinked, but said nothing. Neville, eager to be rid of the previous topic, was the first to speak. "You'll probably run into some of those Skrewts of Hagrid. Can't really reckon they'd find anything else that nasty."

"I'd expect he's right," Blaise said. "If I'm right, Hagrid somehow mated a manticore and a fire crab. The latter is pretty nasty, the former is downright lethal. Say you did come up against one, what would you do?"

"What's your plan of attack if you do encounter one?" Hermione asked, already focused on the new topic of conversation.

Harry sighed, thinking deeply. Several scenarios ran through his head, not all of them ending well for him. "Most of the thing is covered in heavy scales, like armor. I don't have anything in my repertoire at this point that I'm confident can cut through it. I'm probably just best going

for the underbelly. A Slicing Curse would probably hurt it badly enough, or I could just knock the thing out with a Stunning Spell. Either way, I'd need to keep my distance. Let it come to me. They seem quite aggressive."

Hermione nodded, evidently agreeing. "We ought to do some research. If they plan to fill the maze with a variety of dangerous magical creatures, we should work out some strategies and maybe even have you learn a few new spells. How about that Fire Whip Curse? If you wanted to keep something at a distance, it wouldn't be a bad weapon to have."

"Good thinking, Granger," Blaise replied. "Got to agree with her on that one. From what I hear, it's a tough one to master. You have to be careful not to hurt yourself. Creating the whip is one thing, wielding it is another."

"Are you going to try to kill or injure whatever gets in your way?" Neville asked.

Harry shrugged. "Depends. If I think a Stunner will do the trick, I'll go with that. But Stunners don't tend to work against anything that isn't covered in soft flesh."

"I've got an idea," Ginny said. "Even if you aren't really comfortable with the Compression Curse, there's a Light spell that, while a bit weaker, could still be pretty useful. It's called the Depression Curse. It can break through solid objects, but it could also hold a target in place while you looked for a way to knock it out. Might not last all that long though."

Hermione nodded in approval.

"*Creatura Tempero*," a soft voice said from his left. It was Luna. Without saying anything else, she calmly walked into the middle of their sitting area and sat down, cross-legged, dull blue eyes staring at him, a strange smile on her face. "Hello Harry Potter. Hello Ginevra. Hello Neville. Hello Hermione. Hello Blaise."

"Hi," a few of them replied, sounding confused. Naturally, of course, because she was sitting with her back turned to most of them.

"The Creature Control Spell? That's a hard one to master," Blaise said. "The more dangerous and intelligent the creature, the more difficult it is to control. "Control" probably isn't the right word anyway."

"Isn't it also called the Domestication Charm?" Hermione asked, jumping in. "As long as the spell is held, the affected creature will remain docile...but they tend to react badly when the spell is lifted. And I'm not sure how well it would work on something like a Skrewt or a Minotaur, or any semi-sentient magical creature."

"*Minotaur*?" Harry asked. "You really think they'd bring one of those in?"

"*Nothing* would surprise me at this point," Ginny said, sounding cross.

"What else do you think you might be facing?" Neville asked.

"I dunno," Harry said. "An acromantula, perhaps? They could just grab a few out of the Forest...I doubt the centaurs would consent, so they are out. A pool of Grindylows? Kappas?"

"By the way, I finally found out what those winged horses that pull the Beauxbatons carriages are really called: Abraxans," Hermione added. She looked slightly embarrassed for interrupting. "Sorry," she said quickly, blushing. Sometimes her enthusiasm got the better of her.

Harry took pity on her and broke the silence quickly. "Anybody else have any ideas? It doesn't need to be in the least rational or reasonable; Merlin knows that hasn't been a requirement for inclusion in this Tournament," Harry said.

"Heliopaths? Crumple-Horned Snorkaks?"

Everyone ignored Luna, who seemed unfazed. She'd probably been expecting that response.

"Boggart?" Neville suggested.

Harry grimaced. "I wouldn't be surprised." He also wouldn't be surprised if his Boggart wasn't any different than it had been the last time. Time had not faded his deep aversion to being controlled, to

becoming what he hated the most, as Crouch had found out for himself after casting the Imperius Curse. How to possibly make his Voldemort-possessed body into something halfway amusing also escaped him. Hermione had paled a bit at Neville's question. "Not sure what I'd do in that case."

"Make it trip over its own robes?" Ginny suggested weakly.

"That's as good a suggestion as any," Harry admitted. He didn't admit that he had very little faith that it would work. His worst fear wasn't something that could easily be made amusing. And his sense of humor wasn't nearly as Dark as Nott's.

They spent the next hour brainstorming more possible perils in the maze. Among the creatures and plants listed as possible opponents were bicornes, a Chimaera (Harry could only pray Blaise was wrong about that one); a half-grown dragon, a cockatrice, an Erumpent, Fluffy, a Griffin, a Lethifold, a Quintaped, a Runespoor; the list went on and on. Hermione had gathered a mountain of reading material by the time they left.

He had almost a full month until the Third Task, and he wanted to be prepared this time. There would be no mistakes, no oversights this time.

It wasn't very often that something happened to surprise Harry Potter, not with the odd twists and turns this particular year had taken. Yet he was human, and could not possibly predict the most random of events. Like being accosted by a Housemate he'd never spoken a word to on the way back from one of Pucey's late-night strategy sessions. Despite the fact that the season had been cancelled, and the Pitch was currently overgrown, Slytherin's Captain had refused to allow Quidditch to slip far from their minds that year. Pucey was a taskmaster, although his style of leadership was far more cerebral than Flint's thuggish regime. He actually *wrote* his own plays into the playbook, and some of the maneuvers he created were quite inventive and promised to be quite effect, involving as many as all seven players and as few as one, employing decoys, screens, and fakes. If Ginny made the team as a starter next year, as Harry

expected she would, they might finally have an answer to the Lions' relentless attack. Pucey was a good Chaser as well, and Ginny, despite her awful cameo as Seeker his Third Year, could handle a broom and the Quaffle, and had as a reserve Chaser after her debut.

So, bleary-eyed and exhausted from a long day, he'd encountered somebody. A tall, willowy girl, her hair long, curly, and black with a slight hint of red, her eyes a deep and piercing blue. She'd smirked at his brief look of confusion. "*Harry Potter*," she said, sizing him up her eyes. "Been waiting a while to get a chance at meeting you in person."

That didn't make all that much sense to Harry. She wore a silver Prefect's badge, making her at least a 5th year. He'd been there for four years, but he'd never seen this girl before.

"I'm guessing you don't know who I am," the girl said, coming closer, into the light provided by the torches in their wall brackets. "But like I said, I've been waiting a while to talk to you in person."

Slowly, a name emerged from the haze. "Mary Lochley. Muggleborn."

The older girl shot him an approving grin. "Very good," she said, obviously impressed.

"So you have been waiting for a chance to speak with me? Why wait until now?" Harry asked, allowing a bit of his suspicion to slip into his voice. Lochley was unreadable. Most Slytherins hid their emotions by nature, but Muggleborn Slytherins were extremely rare, so to have come this far, Mary had to be quite formidable. It was the first contact he'd had with an older Housemate outside of Quidditch as well, so he was anxious to make a good impression.

"Because I couldn't get you alone. You were either with Weasley, or Granger, or Zabini, or Longbottom, or some combination of them. I don't want them to be a part of this," Mary replied.

"Alright, you've got me alone. Now what?"

"Straight to the point, aren't you, Potter?"

“Always.”

“Not sure if I believe that,” she said. “Every Slytherin needs to dance around what they really want every so often.”

“So they do.”

Lochley cocked an eyebrow. “Not the talkative type, are you, Potter?”

“It’s late. Technically, it’s past curfew.”

“I’m not planning to report you for being out of bed and dock house points, Potter,” Mary said coolly. “I’d just like you to know that I’m quite interested in you. You seem a rather bright chap. And a damn powerful one.”

“So I’m told.” Harry didn’t intend to let the 5th year get anything out of him without Lochley giving away something of her own.

Mary was growing frustrated with him, and it showed. “I suppose you’ll be wanting to know a little more about my motives before you tell me your life’s story?”

“You suppose correctly,” Harry said evenly. “I don’t know you, which means I don’t trust you.”

“You ought to,” Mary said. “I can see why you wouldn’t, of course. But I don’t bite.”

“I’ll judge that for myself.”

“You do that,” she said. “At least listen to what I have to say.”

“Okay.”

Mary took a deep breath. “I’ve got to admit I’ve been somewhat interested in you since your First Year, and I’ve been observing you a lot of that time. We have a surprising amount in common.”

Harry didn’t say anything.

"You weren't accepted by your peers, were you, Potter, when you were first Sorted into Slytherin?" Mary asked, forging on.

"You could say that."

"Your first friend was a Gryffindor, and a Muggleborn at that," Mary pointed out. "Hardly the person you're going to want to associate with if you are trying to curry the favor of Slytherin House."

"What can I say? I saved her life, and nearly got myself killed. She felt she owed me," Harry replied dead-pan.

"*Right.* My point is that I understand what you went through, the isolation, the subconscious self-loathing even though you knew it wasn't your fault. There wasn't anything you could do to force the others to accept you. In my case, doing better and drawing attention to myself just made things worse. I became an 'uppity Mudblood' trying to show up her betters."

"Assuming I believe all of this," Harry interrupted her, "which I'm *not* necessarily saying I do, why didn't you act when you saw another First Year suffering as you had?"

Mary smiled mirthlessly. "I'm a Slytherin, Potter. Associating with you would have been social suicide. I didn't participate in the torment, although I was right unhappy with you when you lost all of those points."

"So to protect your hard-earned social standing, you let me be miserable even though you felt for my situation?" Harry said. "And telling me this accomplishes...?"

"This is more difficult than I'd thought," Mary admitted. "I'd hoped you might respect me a bit more. I am older than you, after all. I thought you might appreciate my help."

"You haven't offered any help. And I'm the elder here, at least in what *matters*," Harry said flatly. "I'm tired, and I'm going to bed. If you want to accost me again, do it at a more reasonable hour."

"I would like to introduce you to a few of my friends," Mary said, stopping him in his tracks. "You don't have many allies among the older Slytherins, Potter. I think I can change that for you, if you'd have me."

"Why?"

"Maybe I'm trying to make up for leaving you alone First Year. Or maybe I understand that you have quite a destiny to fulfill, and you can use all the help you can get. Don't think others haven't noticed your clumsy attempts at building alliances. You've got Daphne Greengrass and her father on your side now, and that means a great deal. Zabini's become a friend. Those are two influential families. Most of us don't see the point of it. They think you are just some overambitious Fourth Year with a bloated sense of self-importance. I don't. I see a whole lot more in you," Mary concluded.

"As much as I appreciate the sentiments," Harry said. "I don't see where this is going. Unless you are formally requesting to be my friend, and believe me, you *aren't* the first to do that this year, I still don't understand what you want. And I'm still not all that interested in what you are telling me," Harry replied evenly. He was still prodding at the girl, trying to learn as much as he could by feigning disinterest. The reality was that he was greatly intrigued by the possibility of having ties to the older Slytherins. And this Mary Lochley seemed quite determined to get on his good side. He was working the situation for all it was worth.

Lochley sighed, flicking her hair back behind her back. "You aren't going to budge easily on this one, are you? Harry Potter: enigmatic, sarcastic, evasive-"

"*Slytherin*," Harry concluded.

Mary grinned. "Yeah, that's what I was getting to. Never could have seen that one coming, really. What with Lily and James Potter being the Golden Children of Gryffindor, the heroes of the battle against You-Know-Who."

"It's not who my parents were that matters. It's who raised me," Harry said. "I'm nothing like my father, despite looking exactly like him,

because I never knew him. Daphne is real to me. She raised me; she was my mother. And Daphne might have been a Ravenclaw, but she's always tended toward the Slytherin side. And she married one, of course."

"She did at that," Mary replied. "What's clear by this point is that the Hat didn't make a mistake. You're as much a Slytherin as any of us are. You might even be the greatest of us. Maybe not in snarkiness, or cunning, or sarcasm. But in power, certainly? In conviction? I'd say you were."

"I suppose I forgot to mention that *flattery* doesn't work with me either," Harry said. "Sorry about that."

To his surprise, Mary laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"You," she said, fighting back the last of her laughter and trying to regain her composure. "You're amazing, you know that, Potter? I came in here expecting an easy job, and it's ended up with you resisting telling me anything I don't already know while trying to pump as much information out of me, the senior Slytherin, as you possibly can. And by Merlin, *you* are winning. I can't resist telling you everything. I find that rather amusing, don't you?"

Harry didn't say anything. She laughed again. "There is it again. Merlin, Potter, I really didn't have any clue what I was up against, did I?"

Something about the way that Lochley was taking her failure was greatly improving Harry's opinion of her. The girl was a Slytherin through-and-through, and could be deceptive, deceitful, and manipulative. She also wasn't full of herself, and was combating his own resistance by acknowledging that she'd messed up. It was an interesting strategy, but Harry couldn't help but think better of her as she laughed at her own stupidity.

"I guess I ought to leave you at this point, to lick my wounds and try this again, as you said 'at a more reasonable hour.' But I do want you to know that I admire you, Potter. Whereas I kind of allowed myself to

change to fit into Slytherin, you really haven't done that. Sure, you aren't the same little kid that got here three odd years ago, but you changed because you wanted to. Not because you let others make you change. That's an admirable trait, even in a Slytherin."

"Thank you," Harry said. Mary chuckled.

"Well, I'd best be off. Got some careless Hufflepuff couples to bust. Heard a rumor Chang and Diggory have turned the Astronomy Tower into their own little love shack too, so I've got to go check on Sinistra's telescopes, if you know what I mean. But I appreciated having a chance to talk to you, Potter. Hopefully we'll do it again someday."

"Hopefully we will," Harry echoed.

Then she stopped, turning around and meeting his eyes. "Potter," she said. "You've been talking to the purebloods, mostly the Dark ones, although I assume if you are planning to fight some kind of war, you'll bring in the Light at some point, too. But where do the Muggleborn fit in? Where do the half-bloods fit in?"

Harry met her eyes. He could continue to be evasive, but he sensed that this was an opportunity to build new bridges that he could not pass up, because it was possible he wouldn't get another shot. So he told her what she wanted to know. "I'm not looking to change what we already have, Lochley. Is this society perfect? No. Is there room for improvement without a political and societal revolution? Absolutely. Am I in support of such changes, such as putting more emphasis on easing the transition of Muggleborns into the magical world? Yes, I am."

"But you *aren't* promising a newer, better world, are you, Potter?" Mary asked. Her voice was quiet, solemn. "You want to work *with* the system we already have."

"I don't think I have a choice," Harry admitted, deciding to hold nothing back. Mary Lochley wanted an honest answer, and he was going to give her that. He trusted her intentions. "The inherent corruption within the system is heavily linked with the disproportionate power that lies in the hands of the purebloods. But if I try to change

that system now, or promise to do it later, I risk alienating the purebloods. And you are right, Lochley. I *am* preparing to fight a war. A war that's coming a lot sooner than people think. I *can't* win that war without the help of the purebloods. They offer many more fully trained adult fighters."

"I see your problem, Potter, believe me, I do." She smiled bitterly. "I just want to make sure you understand that I'm not the rule, but the exception. I admire you and am more apt to follow you because I have been in your place, and I think you've handled it better than I did. But that's *not* true of the others. Don't forget them, Potter, or you might find that few answer the call when it goes out."

With that, she was gone. Shaking his head, Harry continued along the corridor, back toward his dormitory. His life and responsibilities had just become even more complicated.

Despite the fact that Harry was preparing for the Tournament's final task, he still insisted that all of his friends spend as much time as they could practicing their spell-work, and dueling, especially their defensive skills. Whenever more than one of them had a few hours to spare, they'd go to the Room of Requirement, working on technique, trying to master all of the basic offensive and defensive magic they could.

Harry's own progress was quite impressive. As he continued to refine his skills, he found that the average power of his spells seemed to be slowly increasing each day. He knew that, eventually, the power he was gifted with would start to become apparent, but he had no way of knowing when that would be, or how it would manifest itself. It wasn't even a conscious thing; his magic simply seemed to be gaining incremental strength as time went along. This had the added bonus of encouraging his friends to work harder.

He'd been forced to push his other responsibilities and duties to the back of his mind while he prepared for the Third Task. He would not allow himself to forget the words of Aiden, Daphne, Grigory, Nikolai and Natasha, Mary, and Edmond. But at the moment, there was little he could do, and Ginny and Hermione both urged him to put off any

decisions or further actions. Hermione had been pleased to hear about Mary's advice, and clearly agreed with her. Daphne had told him to focus on the present, which he supposed was the same thing. Blaise hadn't really been able to offer much advice at all, except to remind him that threatening the purebloods' power in any way, or suggesting a reduction in their role and influence in the Ministry was tantamount to political suicide. Luna hadn't offered any *coherent* advice, and Neville didn't understand the situation. The bottom line was that their training had moved to the top of the priority list, at least until the Tournament was over. After that, he'd consider his situation, and act accordingly.

Harry had also taken the advice to begin to master new spells. He'd worked tirelessly on the Depression Hex and the Demolition Curse, and was now quite confident in both of them. He'd been experimenting with the Severing Curse, although his aim was slightly off, and the resulting effort wasn't as strong as he'd expected. Hermione's opposition to his learning such a dangerous and Dark curse wasn't helping matters. His shields were also getting stronger. One thing that continued to frustrate him was his inability to execute non-verbal magic. He was at least getting better at anticipating it when others used it, so he wouldn't be caught off guard as he had been in his duel with Malfoy. Overall, however, he'd noticed that his power best manifested itself when he used Dark magic. Slicing Curses were no challenge at all now, and he could cast several in a row without tiring. He'd made a few attempts at the Compression Curse, and been pleased by the results. He'd also taken easily to the Fire Whip Curse, although as Blaise had warned, learning to control his creation was harder than using the magic itself. He'd burned himself more than once.

All of them had made progress, however, and some trends had begun emerging.

Hermione remained reluctant to use fire magic in the mock duels, despite the fact that she was meeting often with McGonagall and her control of her wandless fire magic seemed to be slowly improving. He'd been very impressive by her ability to conjure fire, and suggested that she experiment with trying to shape the fire into different kinds of weapons. Hermione confirmed that the books

McGonagall lent her had advised that she do exactly that. Fire mages were rare in history, but they had been legendary in their versatility and dangerous in a duel. Hermione's defensive work had also taken a step forward, although she remained reluctant to use Dark magic or more powerful light spells.

Ginny's progress had been nothing short of remarkable, considering that she had received far less training in the past than she'd wanted. Her defensive efforts remained below average, though she was working to improve them. But her command of physical dueling spells, as well as the power with which she cast them was outstanding. She was definitely more powerful than the average witch her age, a fact that gave her a great deal of confidence. Her natural aggressiveness made her fast and biting use of physical magic all the more effective, as she could rain down blows with a combination of Striking Hexes, Bludgeoning Curses, Flinging Hexes, Blasting Hexes, and even a nascent Demolition Curse. She was an agile duelist as well, relying more on dodges and dives than defensive magic. It was a technique that would have its problems, but could be quite effective if she kept at it. She'd admitted to Harry that she wanted desperately to be the best, to surpass even Bill in magical skill. That ambition, that drive, in addition to a certain willingness to bend the rules, was what had gotten her Sorted into Slytherin in the first place.

Like Hermione, she'd refused to learn the same kind of Dark magic that he was becoming more and more skilled at using. Harry had let her make that choice. She'd explained that her family had always been light, and that she had made the decision, independent of the rest of her family, that she would stick to that path for now. The conviction in her voice told him that she was telling the truth, and he was supportive of her choice.

Blaise continued to practice blade-work about as often as spell-casting. He'd given Harry a few pointers, although Harry's technique had been quite raw, and he'd tired quickly. A little sparring here and there was all he engaged in, but he saw the potential usefulness of blades if he was fighting a duelist of near-equal strength and ability. Sometimes a Slicing Curse couldn't compare to the real thing. Ginny had also taken an interest, although she'd only handled Blaise's broadsword once or twice, and had trouble wielding it due to her

small frame. She'd done better when the room had given her what was essentially a large dagger, though her lack of physical strength was still a problem.

Neville's approach to dueling was cautious, lacking in confidence, and conservative at best. Harry had worked hard with him on wand movements and basic Light offensive spells. When Neville was focused, he was a quick learner, but he tended to forget some of the pointers Harry gave him.

There was another aspect of work that Harry had also tried to introduce: physical training. In addition to taking runs around the grounds every morning, Daphne had presented him with a few manuals of unarmed combat. She was no master at it herself; she much preferred spells to fists, but when she looked into his eyes and told him that her competence at martial arts had more than once saved her life, Harry believed her. And so they experimented with holds, learning to use centers of gravity to overpower larger opponents. Ginny had made the most progress, as the bruises Harry had accumulated from their sparring matches bore testament. The skills they were learning were a hodgepodge of techniques and movements from a dozen different martial arts, but they were surprisingly effective. Hermione worked very hard at it, and also insisted upon accompanying Harry on his morning runs. Harry suspected that she wanted to make sure what Crabbe and Goyle had done to her on Christmas Night never happened again.

Harry watched from the side as Ginny and Hermione went at it. Both girls were sweating and red in the face. Ginny lunged forward and grabbed Hermione's right arm, twisting it behind her as she tried to get her friend into a headlock. Hermione countered by shifting her weight, which threw Ginny slightly off balance. She pushed a foot back around and wrapped it around one of Ginny's legs, then twisted. Ginny lost her grip and stumbled, away but immediately came back with a round-house kick that Hermione wasn't able to deflect. The Gryffindor was knocked backwards, but reached out and grabbed Ginny's leg, twisting it, and sending both of them crashing painfully to the floor. Ginny growled angrily, getting up to strike again, and Harry decided to end it before it got more violent. "Alright, stop it, both of you. That's enough."

Both panting girls looked up at him. "Why'd you stop us?" Ginny panted.

"Because one or both of you was going to get hurt. Honestly, I think we'd best wait until we can get some more proper training at this. Let's stick to what we know for now."

Hermione nodded in agreement. Ginny looked a little unhappy, but didn't say anything further. "Pretty good work there, Granger," Blaise said from the corner. Neville was also over there as a nervous spectator. "Harry's right, though, that was less technique and more aggression."

Hermione could have argued, but she nodded at him as well, wiping her face with a towel. That was a good sign, Harry thought. Hermione had become less overtly hostile toward Blaise, but there was still a lot of unresolved tension between them.

They had about a week and a half before the Third Task of the Triwizard Tournament. Harry had studied up on just about every dangerous magical creature he could think of, and Hermione's research had, as always, been impeccable. Neville had been a great help as well, as his knowledge of Herbology might come in handy if he ran into some dangerous plants. From his experience with Hermione during his first year, from which he still carried some light scars, he knew the danger that magical plants could pose. Neville had told him where they were most vulnerable, and also warned him about the dangers each plant posed. For example, the Venomous Tentacula's vines were extremely strong, and also shed a numbing agent that would weaken its prey before it was devoured.

"Guys, I've got to admit, you've been making some really good progress," Harry said. "All of you have improved in one way or another, and I'm quite proud of the lot of you."

"Speak for yourself," Ginny said. "You're casting spells so powerful now that none of us even bother to try to block them."

"Speaking of which, I've got another one you might want to try," Hermione said. She ran over to her bag and pulled out a worn book. "The Stone-Throwing Hex. It's a complicated one, and it involves

some conjuring. It says the stones can be as devastating as a bullet, though. They can be blocked, obviously, but it still seems quite useful.” She opened the book to a certain page and brought it over to him. “There’s a whole lot of spells that involve creating and then shooting physical objects from a wand. Arrows, knives, spears, you name it, it can be used as a projectile weapon.”

Harry quickly read the passage, most of which Hermione had just summarized. The others gathered around them. “Brilliant,” Harry said, beaming at his best friend. “What’s the incantation?”

“*Silex iacio*,” Hermione said. “You can also throw more than one at a time, just by modifying the spell with the Latin word for two, three, etc. The more stones you throw, the harder it is to throw them with decent velocity and accuracy, though.”

Harry studied the diagram of the wand movement. It was similar to that of a Flinging Hex. He turned around, aimed at the wall, flipped his wand back then forward, and cast. “*Silex iacio!*”

A small pebble shot a small distance out of his wand and fell well short of the wall. “Needs work,” Harry said, stating the obvious.

“Lemme try,” Ginny said, digging her own wand out of her bag. She cast it, with markedly better results. Her slightly larger stone didn’t hit with enough force to do much damage, but she did hit the wall. “Cool,” she said, grinning. “Nice going, Hermione. This is definitely something we could use.”

“How come Ginny was able to do it better than Harry?” Neville asked.

Harry shrugged. “Dunno. Magic can be unpredictable. Definitely means Ginny ought to work at it, if her first attempt was that successful.” Harry cast a Time Charm. “We’d best be getting to dinner. Mind joining us at the Slytherin table, Nev?”

The Gryffindor grimaced, then shook his head. “Sorry, Harry, I just really don’t want to cause any trouble. They *really* don’t like me there.” Harry couldn’t disagree with his statement, although he was a bit disappointed. *Baby steps*, he reminded himself. “You’ll keep Hermione company, then?”

“Of course he will,” Hermione said brightly, catching on. She wasn’t exactly a regular at the Slytherin table either, as her presence tended to create a lot of unwanted tension, though no one dared to say anything offensive when Harry was there. Not since the duel, anyway.

Harry moved into the Forbidden Forest with caution, although he seemed to know exactly where he was going without having ever been there before. He also knew who he was going to see, despite the fact that he’d received no formal invitation or request, in writing or in words. No, the invitation that he’d received had been far more informal, far more *intimate*.

It had come from within his own mind. Most wouldn’t trust such an invitation. Indeed, given the connection that Harry shared with Voldemort, he should have approached such a situation with more caution and care. Instead, he had without a second thought gotten up from his nap, donned a light cloak, and wandered into the Forbidden Forest.

She was there, as he’d expected. Her long, scraggly, dirty-blond hair flowing back over her shoulders, her short stature emphasized by the fact that she was barefoot. He came closer, and then stopped. He smiled as he recognized where he was, and why she had come here. For it was a place that so few could appreciate.

“Hello Luna.”

She turned. Luna Lovegood’s protuberant blue eyes came up to meet his, and she smiled slightly. “I knew you’d come.”

“It’s worked before,” Harry admitted. “And the last time you called me to a private meeting, you wanted something from me. You wanted me to understand. Is that why I am here?”

“Perhaps,” she said, shrugging. Luna wore her school robes, though her Ravenclaw badge was strangely absent. “I choose not to wear it in private,” Luna said, as if detecting his thoughts. Indeed, that was exactly what she had done. Harry had come to learn that Luna had the ability to see things that most people could not see, did not want to see, or chose not to see. She understood human nature to a

degree that was not thought possible. She was not *just* a natural Legilimens, although she certainly was *that*. For she could not only see into the minds of others, but she could also make them see what she wanted to see. She carried with her an immense power, and a terrible responsibility.

Just as he did, in his own way.

"I wear it in public because it is expected of me. I am supposed to represent my House, and all that it stands for. It's a silly thing, really. Come closer. I have someone I'd like you to meet."

Harry did so. Although her motives remained a mystery to him, he trusted Luna Lovegood in a way that he trusted no other. She had earned that trust when she had done something that only she had the power and the...*unique* perspective to do. She had healed his mind, made him *whole* again after Daphne had ripped his consciousness to shreds, reduced him to a half-healed jumble of confused, and often frightening thoughts. He trusted her then, and she'd rewarded that trust. And since then, she had been an advisor of sorts. He had grown to understand her as no one else had. Luna gave nothing freely, but she expected little in return. Just common kindness, and a willingness to listen. The most basic and essential of gifts. And, increasingly, the *rarest* of all gifts.

Sitting on his haunches in front of Luna was a young thestral, his wings too small and undeveloped to fly. His crimson eyes were locked on the piece of meat that Luna had in her right hand. As he came to her side, she tossed the meat away from them; the small creature quickly raced toward it, and began feasting.

"I like them," she said. "They don't judge."

"They are...*beautiful* in their own way," Harry admitted.

"It is ironic that so many consider them to be a curse, a reminder that one has stared death itself in the face. But perhaps they are meant as a gift, a consolation. The ability to see them is only given after you have seen someone fall into the abyss. Perhaps it is the universe's way of apologizing."

The young Thestral was back for more. Luna obliged him, tossing a larger piece of meat this time. In addition, more thestrals were coming toward them, males, females, mostly adults. They converged upon Luna as if they had never seen a human before, ignoring Harry entirely.

"Perhaps they are that," Harry said. "That still doesn't explain why I am here."

"I don't think I *can* offer an explanation. That was *your* decision, not mine. You are the one that decided that the voice in your mind was mine, that it was calling your name because I wanted you to be here, and that because I was going through all of that trouble, I must have wished to impart some piece of wisdom to you."

Harry couldn't really argue with that logic. Something was different about Luna, something was missing. Her words were not playful, but heavy, as if they carried a large burden. There was no joy, no curiosity, or innocence in that voice. "You've seen something." It was not a question.

"I am *not* a Seer, Harry Potter," Luna said. "I can only see what is happening at the very moment. I live in the present, just like you...most of the time, that is. There are times where you are entrapped by the past, and by the future."

She turned to face him again. "The Darkness is Rising, Harry Potter. It will be here soon. War, death, and sorrow will once again grip this world."

"I know," Harry whispered quietly.

"Would you like to help me feed them? They like you, you know. They can feel the power within you, the potential."

"The potential for what?"

"To do great good...and great evil. It does not matter to them. They have served many masters, Light and Dark and everything in between," Luna said. "You are a nexus, Harry Potter. With you go the fortunes of the wizarding world. You do not need a Prophecy to

define your destiny. You know the truth. You know what you must do, and what you must suffer.”

“I do,” Harry admitted. “I’m going to have to kill him, aren’t I? And in so doing, I might have to kill myself.”

“Yes,” Luna said, sounding sad. “Of course, you might still survive. You are the alpha...and the omega. The beginning...and the end.”

“The *beginning*?” Harry asked, stunned by the implications. “The Second War will begin with *me...because of me*?”

Luna nodded. Her eyes betrayed a hint of regret.

Harry stared at her in confusion. “How? When? Where? Why?”

“That is in the future, not the present. I cannot answer that question. Neither can they,” she said, gesturing at the thestrals. “But while fate is powerful, Harry Potter, it cannot choose the path that you will take to fulfill it. That choice is yours, and yours alone. Do not delude yourself into believing you have no choice, no power to change what is and what will be. Do not allow yourself to be helpless...and to accept it. Fight it, embrace it, seek to alter it, but do not passively let events transpire as they will. There are many endings, and many beginnings.”

Harry tried to wrap his head around what he was hearing. “Isn’t it a paradox?” he asked. “To have choice, but not to have choice.”

“But you *do* have a choice,” Luna insisted. “You are the beginning and you are the end because you *want* to be. You *want* to destroy Voldemort. You *want* to fulfill your purpose in life. You are a Slytherin, Harry Potter. You are ambitious, you are cunning, and you are driven by nothing more or less than enlightened self-interest.”

“What about Ginny?” Harry asked.

“What about her?”

“What role does she have to play in this?”

"I don't know."

Harry groaned. "Somehow I knew you were going to say that."

"Yes, you did," Luna replied. "There is no destiny involved in your relationship with Ginevra, Harry. Indeed, it is the greatest embodiment of *choice* that I can think of. The relationship is symbiotic. Both of you benefit from it, and both of you cherish it."

"Can it last?" Harry asked.

Luna shrugged. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. There will be many choices that you will make that will provide an answer to that question. What she means to you is private, unique. Make of that what you will. Love is only what you *choose* to make of it."

"You're saying that I love her?"

Luna frowned. "I didn't say that. I don't *know* that. I don't know what it would be like if you were in love with her. It's different for everyone, Harry. It's your call. Are you in love with her?"

Harry paused, thinking. He could say many things, but only one response was truly honest. "I don't know. Does it matter?"

"Does it?"

Harry glared at her. "You aren't making any sense."

Luna shrugged, dug three more pieces of meat out of her bag, and began to feed the thestrals again. "So you called me out here to tell me what I *already* know. You can't answer anything in the least bit specific, or give me a straight answer. Now I have *more* questions and doubts than when I arrived!" Harry said, his anger growing.

"You are angry with me."

"Yes," Harry said, his voice almost hysterical. "I'm angry because you keep teasing me, keep hinting at this otherworldly knowledge, only to tell me that you *can't* tell me or *won't* tell me. That's *irritating*."

"I'm sorry, then," Luna said. "I'd like to be your friend, Harry Potter. I'd like to spend more time with you, and Ginevra, and Hermione, and Neville, and Blaise. I'd like to get to know them, to know what true friendship was like. That's one thing I have yet to understand."

"Blaise essentially asked the same of me several months ago."

"And you accepted him."

"I did."

Luna's eyes betrayed a vague curiosity. "And?"

"You're welcome to join us whenever you wish. The others will have to decide for themselves, but I don't mind you being my friend. You're a *unique* person, Luna...if also a horribly *frustrating* one at times."

"So I've been told." She sighed. "It will be nice, to be accepted. To have others care about me. Do you know why I am not wearing any shoes, Harry Potter?"

He shook his head.

"My shoes are gone. Some of my classmates play a game with me where they take my things and hide them from me. I know where they are, of course," she added. "But that eliminates the point of the game."

"You realize that they are mocking you, of course."

"Yes," Luna said. "They try to provoke me, to make me angry, because anger is normal. But I don't want to be *normal*, Harry Potter. I am who I am."

"And you certainly aren't normal," Harry said under his breath. She nodded.

"You should go. Your friends will be waiting for you, worrying about you. The Third Task is tomorrow."

"Believe me, I'm well aware of that. Is there something you would like to share? Better yet, if you can see into the minds of everyone, why didn't you tell me that Crouch was impersonating Moody? A girl *died*, Luna. You might have been able to do something to prevent that."

Luna appeared as sad and conflicted as Harry had ever seen her look. "I made a *mistake*," she said in a small voice. "I thought that by not acting, I was doing the right thing. I've *always* been on the outside. I've *never* set things in motion. I thought that everything would work out. I wasn't aware of who he *really* was, although I suspected something was *off* about him. I was *wrong*. I'm *sorry*."

Tears streamed down her face. Obviously, the guilt was eating away at her. Harry moved to her, pulled her into his arms. She relaxed in his embrace, sobbing into his robes. When he sensed she was done, he let her slip away, giving her the distance she wanted. She moved toward the gathering crowd of thestrals. After a long silence, he spoke again. "You came here to see them," Harry said, trying to understand.

She nodded. "I can talk to them, Harry, and they can understand the grief that I feel."

"So there's nothing else?" Harry asked. "Nothing that you are holding back from me."

"Nothing," she said. "Nothing that can change what is going to happen. There are certain things that I cannot do anything to prevent, I'm not omniscient, Harry. The tides of magic and thought ebb and flow, and I listen to them, watch them when no one else bothers to. But, there are certain things that I cannot do anything to prevent "

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Harry demanded. "Is there something or isn't there?"

"I don't know," Luna admitted. A small tear had trailed down her cheek, though she didn't seem on the verge of breaking down again. Her voice was dead, mournful. She was emotionally drained. "I'll do what I can. But even *I* miss things, Harry. Even *I* chose not to look into some places. *I* chose not to discover why Moody felt so strange

to me. I decided it was not my place. I can only hope that I haven't overlooked something once again."

"I guess that's the best you *can* do," Harry told her. "You don't read everyone's mind, do you?"

"There are certain things that I have no right to intrude upon," Luna said.

At least there's that, Harry thought to himself. He guessed his classmates wouldn't take the news that Luna was capable of invading their minds nearly as well. "Luna, I'm going. Would you like to come with me?"

She slowly shook her head. "I want to stay out here a bit longer," she said. "Maybe I'll even sleep out here, under the stars. Trying to forget. Trying to understand."

"Just know that you are welcome to join us if you wish," Harry said. He felt terrible for the girl. Harry had managed to accept that Gabrielle's death was not his fault using logic and reason. By the same methods, Luna had determined that the blame was, in part, hers.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for understanding. Thank you for not judging me on my mistakes." She smiled sadly. "Thanks for being here for me, Harry." She turned away from him, staring back at the thestrals. He waited, but she seemed to have made up her mind.

Harry left her there, his own mind trying to understand what he now knew...and what he did not know.

Though as baffled as the encounter had left him, he wasn't sure he'd ever heard Luna Lovegood say so many words without including a mention of Crumple-Horned Snorkaks.

To say the least, *that* bothered him.

Later that night, Daphne Dressler moved silently into the maze, carrying the Triwizard Cup. She had insisted upon this duty, wanting

to ensure that her ward would not be the victim of further trickery or betrayal. And she had dared the other judges to accuse her of deceit, of somehow charming the Cup so that Harry would win. None had taken her up on that dare. They knew by now that Daphne was not interested in helping Harry to win, only in helping him to survive. The creatures that were to arrive in several hours would make the Task dangerous enough as it was.

The Ministry's reaction to the deaths of the Crouches had been utterly predictable: silence. Dumbledore had sent a half-dozen owls to Fudge and his cronies, urging them to take action, imploring them to at the very least acknowledge that the death of the senior Crouch was not an isolated incident. Fudge hadn't even bothered to refute Dumbledore's theory. *The cowardly fool was probably barricaded in his office, surrounded by his closest and most thick-headed advisors, pretending as if all was normal.* Daphne despised the man, and hated that there was absolutely nothing that any of them could do to force the Ministry to take action no matter how credible the evidence. Fudge had come into a Ministry promising peace and prosperity in the wake of endless death, and he'd been consumed by that dream, to the point where he refused to awaken to a world on the brink of war.

She let these thoughts slide to the back of her mind as she felt the air around her growing warmer. There was nothing to be done about it at the moment. Harry hadn't asked yet, but he would. If there was anything she could count on, it was his curiosity.

Daphne had just moved inside the maze when she heard a rustling somewhere to the right of her. She reached out with her senses, searching desperately, trying to find out if she was not alone. But she neither saw nor sensed another person. *Better to be safe than sorry,* she decided. *"Homenum Revilio,"* she cast.

Too late. *"Stupefy!"* The voice and accompanying jet of red light came from behind her, and she'd only half-completed her turn when the hex hit. She slumped to the ground, unconscious.

As soon as she lay still, the hooded figure that he ambushed the Grey Maiden moved out of the shadows and let her Disillusionment Charm

fall away. Alecto Carrow sneered at the unconscious form before her. She wanted nothing more than to speak two words and end this woman's life. She was the one that had killed Amycus, the only person she had ever loved. But she restrained herself. Unlike that fool Crouch, she would not allow her personal vendettas to get in the way of serving her master. The Dark Lord had a task for her, and she was going to accomplish it, even at the cost of her own life. She would probably never get the chance to kill this woman. It didn't matter. There was no greater calling than serving the Dark Lord. She had been chosen for this task because only she could hide her magical signature, and so lay a trap for the Grey Maiden. And the ancient inherited ability of the Carrow clan had beaten the ancient inherited ability of the soon-to-be defunct O'Connor family. But she knew that she could not kill the woman...yet. Polyjuice Potion couldn't work if the donor of the hairs was dead. For now, Dressler had to live.

Alecto had to use a Lightening Charm to drag the larger woman out of the maze. She opened a small door that led underneath the grand stands. Once she had lain the Grey Maiden's body well inside the passage, directly underneath the Judge's platform, as it turned out, she pulled a vial from her robes, and pulled out the stopper. She tilted the woman's head up, and poured the Sleeping Potion down her throat. Once the affects of the Stunning Spell wore off, she would remain unconscious for at least another 24 hours. Plenty of time for her to do what she needed to do. Alecto bent down and cut away several blonde hairs from the ex-Auror's scalp, pocketing them. For good measure, she cast a Disillusionment Charm on the woman to ensure she wasn't found. She thought about taking the woman's wand, but decided it was unnecessary. She needed to get back outside before her absence was noticed.

Alecto pulled out a second, larger vial. She added one of the hairs to her Polyjuice Potion, and the liquid bubbled for a few seconds. She drained the entire vial, returning it quickly to her robes. She felt her body begin to change. She became taller, more muscular. Well-known scars crept across her face, her hair lightened and shortened. In less than ten seconds, she had become the perfect likeness of Daphne Artemis O'Connor Dressler, guardian of Harry Potter and murderer of her brother. She slipped back over into the maze, picking up the Triwizard Cup. She easily navigated through the winding path,

and eventually reached the center. She placed the Cup on the altar. Then she drew her wand, and cast the same spell that Daphne had. She was alone. She tapped the Cup with her wand. "*Portus*," she whispered. The Cup glowed bright blue for a moment, then the light died away. She smiled. Her work tonight was done. All she needed to do know was to ensure that her true identity went undiscovered. Her master would attend to the rest. She walked back to Daphne Dressler's rented flat in Hogsmeade, locking all of the doors, put a vial of Polyjuice beside her bed in case she had any surprise visitors, and then slept.

The sound of the band and roar of the crowd had scarcely died down when Bagman began to speak. "Welcome, everyone, to the Third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament!" The crowd roared lustily. The stands around the pitch were packed with screaming students. The judges, including Daphne, sat in the Teacher's Box, alongside the Hogwarts faculty. Daphne had wished him luck a few hours previous, but seemed distracted. Something was off about her, but Harry felt it was probably nothing to worry about. Once this was all over, they could talk.

Once again, he, Fleur, Cedric, and Viktor had assembled, this time in front of the massive maze that had taken over the Quidditch Pitch. All four of them were tired, anxious, and weary of the entire spectacle. As Fleur had said, they had already lost more than they could gain. Too bad that no one in the audience seemed to understand that. Even Ginny had assured him that they'd be rooting him on, and that she wanted to see him win the Tournament. For once, she'd read him wrong; he had no interest in winning the Tournament. He would compete, because that was what was expected of him. But he didn't care what the ultimate outcome was. If Luna was right, he'd soon be confronting a far more difficult challenge.

He was as ready as he was going to be. Clad in black dragon-hide battle robes and boots, physically fit, armed with an expanded arsenal of spells, he felt confident that he could face any challenge posed before him and walk away victorious. It was only a matter of how well Krum, Cedric, and Fleur could do the same.

Bagman went over the standings, and the adjusted scoring rules, which brought some boos raining down on him from the Hufflepuff stands. He then told them that the Champions would enter in order of standing, with ten seconds between them. Each was to choose his own entrance of the eight available. Harry chose his randomly, simply because he had no way of knowing which was the best option. The other champions made their choices. Harry exchanged a look with Cedric as he took his position. He wasn't sure what made him do it.

"On my whistle, Cedric Diggory will enter the maze," Bagman declared. "One, two..." He blew hard on the whistle, and Cedric was off. Harry waited, counting down the time in his mind. His wand was clenched in his right hand. He began moving at the same instant that Bagman told him to enter the maze. Harry rushed into his entrance, then slowed, moving more cautiously. The fading light made the place seem dark and forbidding. As he moved deeper into the maze, the sounds of the crowd died away. He heard spell-fire from some distance away, probably Cedric, but he ignored it.

He'd gone no further than twenty meters into the hedge maze when he rounded a corner and discovered that Neville had been right. The passage he'd taken opened up into a large rectangular arena. Blocking the exit was the biggest Skrewt that Harry had yet seen. It was well over two meters in length, covered in shiny black scales and spikes, and stared menacingly at him. He halted, waiting to see if it might advance. It didn't. Harry decided to get its attention. "*Confrigo!*" he yelled. His Demolition Curse struck the ground in front of the Skrewt, the force of the blast nearing knocking it onto its back. Just as quickly, it recovered, roared, and charged, a burst of fire sending it flying forward like a missile.

Harry dove to the side as the deadly creature flew past him, slamming into one of the walls of the maze. It spun around and launched a ball of fire from its tail. The force of the impact with Harry's shield knocked him back, and he lost his balance and fell on his backside. The Skrewt charged again. Harry fired off two Slicing Curses as it came. The first ricocheted off the top of the creature's armored back. Harry second cast was better aimed, and it gouged out the right eye of the creature, stopping its charge as it let out a howl of pain. Harry dove to avoid another blast from the beast's

coiled tail. He completed the roll, coming up to one knee, took aim, and fired a Severing Curse. His practice had paid off, as the Dark curse took the form of a wedge of light, and was powerful enough to punch through the creature's scales and separate the tail from the rest of its body.

Enraged and wounded, the Skrewt came again. Harry waited for the right moment, letting the thing come as close as he dared. It reared back to crush him under its weight, and Harry let his magic flow through him as he unleashed a wand-buckling Severing Curse. The wedge of magic easily penetrated the unprotected underbelly of the Skrewt, and the power behind the spell knocked the Skrewt back onto its back. Blood poured from the deep wound. If it wasn't dead, it would be soon. Harry decided not to stick around to find out, picking himself off the ground and dashing past the fallen beast. He hoped Hagrid wouldn't be too upset.

Using the Navigation Spell to guide him, he punched a hole through the hedges to his left, quickly slipping through as the barriers regenerated in record time, a few vines reaching out to try to ensnare him. He kept wandering through the darkened maze. He reached another dead end, and decided to blast another hole through the wall. He nearly regretted it as the Demolition Curse was reflected right back at him, missing his head by centimeters. So much for *that* idea. He could hear Bagman's muffled voice doing the commentary, and wondered idly if some of the students were laughing at his failure.

He had to keep moving. He rounded a corner and nearly had his head taken off in the process. He instinctively loosed a Burning Hex, and the fire drove back the huge Venomous Tentacula that had just barely missed decapitating him. He loosed another ball of fire at the carnivorous plant, driving it back as he advanced forward. He quickly found himself facing a situation almost identical to that he and Hermione had encountered in their mad dash through Sprout's contribution to the defenses of the Philosopher's Stone.

Crossing the ground in front of him were thick tangles of Thorned Strangle vines, looking no less dangerous to him now as they had to his eleven-year old eyes three years ago. Maybe a dozen Venomous Tentaculas were scattered about, sharp teeth glistening in the fading

sunlight. He saw other dangerous plants, including Red-Thorned Spiky Bushes (the kind that carried a paralysis-inducing poison).

One lesson that Harry had learned over the years was that discretion was the better part of valor. He wasn't going to make it through this chamber in one piece. He turned around and headed back the way he came. He managed to find a small gap in the wall he hadn't noticed the first time around, and moved into another deserted passage.

He quickly realized that the Navigation Spell was only so useful in this confusing and hostile environment. Unwilling to risk killing himself by blasting another shielded wall, Harry had to stick with the paths that already existed. He moved into another chamber, feeling more confident. He was getting closer. That was when he saw the Runespoor.

And it was a big one, larger than he'd ever seen in any of his textbooks. The extremely deadly serpent, almost three meters long, six fangs...and three heads. He approached cautiously. "*Flagro Flagello*," he cast, and a fiery whip erupted from the end of his wand. If this turned into a fight, he'd have to keep the deadly creature at a distance.

"Might you consider letting me pass?" Harry asked, the subtle hiss of Parseltongue now quite familiar to his ears.

The first head, the planner, stared up at him with suspicion. It turned and looked past the middle head, the dreamer, to the third head, the critic. It was the third head that he might have some trouble with. Most of the time, the recommended approach to dealing with a Runespoor was to take off the planner's head and run like hell. Not only was Harry not sure that that would work, but he was also keenly aware that he was in a rather unique situation. He might be able to reason with the creature, and avoid a fight entirely.

"Perhaps, speaker," the dreamer replied.

"Fool," the critic snapped. "Were we not placed here to impede the progress of humans like this one?"

"Yet he does not attack us," the planner pointed out. "He speaks to us."

"You speak the language of serpents, boy?" the dreamer asked. "We have never encountered such a human before. You aren't normal."

"I've heard that before," Harry told them. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Then why do you wield a weapon, speaker?" asked the critic. "You do not trust us?"

"No, not particularly."

"Well, then why should we trust your promise not to attack us?" the critic asked.

"Perhaps he is different," the dreamer suggested.

"Perhaps he knows that he cannot win, and has decided to take another approach," the planner added.

"Mother told us stories of the snake-man," the dreamer said. "Perhaps this is he?"

Snake-man? Voldemort? Harry wondered.

"Attack him," the critic hissed.

"No, not yet," the planner hissed back. "Why should we agree to your request, speaker?"

"Because I'm asking politely?"

"He is a coward," the critic said. "He does not believe he can defeat us."

"That's not true," Harry said. "I'd just rather not risk injuring you."

"An empty threat," the critic hissed dismissively.

"We shall attack," the planner said. The Runespoor moved forward slowly. Harry snapped the whip.

"Stop," he ordered.

"Why should we?" the critic asked.

"Perhaps he is important," the dreamer said. "He has already proven himself to be different."

"Has he?" the critic snapped. "Lower your weapon, speaker."

"Will you attack?" Harry asked the planner.

The head paused, then shook side to side. "We shall postpone."

"Drop your weapon," the critic ordered. Harry took a deep breath and canceled the Fire Whip Curse, then let his wand fall to the ground. A part of him cursed his stupidity, while another continued to hold out hope.

"Let me pass," Harry said. "I shall insure that you are released back into the wild."

"We have lived in captivity for our entire lives, speaker," the planner said.

"And how do we know that you have the authority to make this happen?" the critic asked.

"The dreamer was right," Harry said. "I am important. I am Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. Surely you have heard my name, and my story before."

"We have," the planner admitted.

"It would be lovely to live on our own in the wild, free to make our own decisions," the dreamer said, a hint of longing in his voice. "You are being honest, I can tell."

"And how is *that*?" snapped the critic. "You are an idealistic fool. He is no different-"

“But he is,” the planner interrupted. “He stands before us, unarmed, and unafraid. He neither fights nor flees. He has placed his fate in our hands.”

The critic let loose an unhappy hiss that probably passed for a groan. “You have made your decision?”

“I have,” the planner said. “Swear to us that you have spoken the truth, and you may pick up your wand and continue.”

“I swear, in the name of my magic, that I have told the truth,” Harry said. “When this is over, I will do everything in my power to ensure you are released into the Forbidden Forest.”

“He speaks truthfully,” the dreamer said, sounding ecstatic. “We will be free!”

The critic was silent. “We will move aside,” the planner said. The snake slithered to the right, moving out of striking distance and leaving Harry’s path unimpeded. Harry nodded at them, and picked up his wand.

“Thank you,” Harry said. The heads nodded, and he continued deeper into the maze, breathing a massive sigh of relief. The truth was that he didn’t think he’d stand any chance against the Runespoor, which could move fast enough to dodge any spells he threw at it. He wondered absently if Dumbledore had chosen to include this particular creature just for him, as a personal test. Shaking his head, he decided that he didn’t care if the old man had or not.

He continued through the maze. Adrenaline pounded in his veins as he felt himself drawing closer and closer to his goal. He dashed into a side passage, hoping for a shortcut. Instead, he found something altogether different.

Fleur Delacour was on her hands and knees, sobbing. Directly in front of her was an open chest, and looming above it was a ghostly apparition of Gabrielle, speaking in rapid-fire French. Harry couldn’t make out the words, but the boggart was surely blaming Fleur for her sister’s death. The French girl turned as he approached. “I give up. Go. I ‘ave nothing to gain. I will stay here.”

“Fleur-”

“Go!” she yelled angrily, tears streaking down her pale cheeks. “Do not lose on my account. It is too late for me, and too late for *ma petite soeur*. I ‘ave already failed.” She broke down again.

Harry averted his eyes from the boggart, not wanting it to suddenly transform into his Death Eater alter-ego. He felt nothing at that moment but the deepest pity and sorrow for the proud and beautiful girl. But she had made her choice. For her, this nightmare of a competition was over. Harry pushed back the feelings of guilt at leaving her here and continued onward.

He moved into the next clearing, and was met by a frightening sight.

Cedric Diggory lay on his side, motionless, his handsome face pale and drawn. His robes were already cut, and there was a nasty-looking cut on his right cheek.

And standing over him, wand still extended, was Viktor Krum. Harry hadn’t believed the Bulgarian capable of the things he’d heard in the rumors, but what he saw right now seemed to confirm his worst fears. Especially after he sent another Cruciatus Curse into the stricken young man’s body.

Slytherin or not, Harry didn’t just leave a schoolmate to be tortured into insanity while he slipped by. As Blaise had repeatedly told Hermione, that just wasn’t the kind of *person* that he was at heart.

Viktor Krum had noticed his presence and turned to deal with it. Three Slicing Curses lanced out at Harry with remarkable accuracy. His shield dealt with the first two, but the third, hitting the weakened magical barrier, dug a deep groove across his left shoulder. Biting back a scream, he returned fire, but Krum easily slapped aside his hexes. “What the hell are you doing?!” Harry screamed at him. “Have you lost your mind?”

Harry noticed the milky-white coloring of the Bulgarian’s eyes just before he had to dive out of the way of a Cruciatus Curse. That answered his question. Krum hadn’t lost his mind. Someone *e/se* had arranged that for him.

Harry's mind was racing. Krum was under the Imperius Curse, and clearly a significant danger to him. But he was also an ally, maybe even a friend. Harry wasn't willing to do him serious harm. Not the way that *Daphne* had...

Don't think about that! He screamed at himself. This was neither the time nor the place. The brief slip of memory became all the more easy to forget when he had to hit the deck to avoid being killed by Krum's Severing Curse. Harry rolled over, snagging his injured shoulder on something on the ground and hissing in pain. He got up, wand drawn. "Fight it Krum! Fight it!"

His only response was to fire two more Cruciatus Curses at Harry, who was now being backed into a dead end. He was running out of space, time, and needed to make a decision now. He made it.

Harry unleashed a barrage of curses, some without incantations, mixing physical impacts with cutting spells and wide-area energy spells. Krum threw up a shield belatedly, but Harry had guessed right. It wasn't easy for a witch or wizard to fight a duel by proxy while maintaining an Imperius Curse, whether directly (by literally treating the cursed victim as a kind of living puppet) or indirectly (by implanting suggestions to dictate behavior). Krum was blown backward by the fireworks display, slamming hard into the ground, bleeding and bruised. Harry blasted the downed Seeker with a ferocious mental attack, quickly finding and severing the mental hold of the person controlling him. It was a woman, but that was all he determined before the connection snapped. Krum's eyes went wide with fear and rage, this time his own. Harry didn't have a choice. His Stunning Spell hit the unarmed man and knocked him back into oblivion. "Sorry, Viktor," he whispered. He applied a small Numbing Charm to his bleeding shoulder to dull the pain, then ran forward, deeper into the maze, though not before pausing to fire red sparks into the air. Krum needed medical attention. Cedric might as well. Whoever responded to the sparks would find both of them.

Harry continued on. It looked like he was the last one standing.

He moved into a large, open clearing. At the center of it was a short altar, and atop it was the elusive Triwizard Cup. He could see no

threats, no obvious obstacles, but he did not pick up his pace. Appearances could be deceiving, and he wasn't going to get himself killed when he could see his goal. Besides, with the others already down for the count, he wasn't exactly under time pressure.

As it turned out, he was wrong. A spell flew past his shoulder, and he watched in stunned disbelief as Cedric Diggory raced past him, a blur of color and motion, running full bore for the Cup. Apparently, the boy hadn't been as badly injured as Harry had suspected.

His alarm grew when Cedric slowed, raising his wand and pointing it at their mutual goal.

Oh, no you don't...

"*Accio Cu-*" Cedric began.

"*Spiculum!*" Harry cried. The Stinging Hex to his back broke Cedric's concentration, though the large Triwizard Cup still toppled off the altar and fell to the ground. Harry's competitive instincts took over. One thought pounded over and over in his mind: *GET. THE. CUP.*

He scrambled forward, catching up to Cedric than passing him, then tripping on a random root and falling to his hands and knees. The Hufflepuff pursued him, fury flashing in his normally kind eyes. "Not this time, Potter!" he roared. He dashed forward and grabbed onto the Boy-Who-Lived's leg, pulling himself down on top of him, slamming Harry's face in the ground.

Harry wrestled with him, throwing the larger boy off. His vision tunneled. All he saw was the Cup in front of him. "*Percutio!*" he hissed, sending Cedric rolling to his right. He felt sorry for the Hufflepuff, but Harry was determined that he wouldn't let all the pain, all the suffering be in vain. He was going to *win* this Tournament.

He got back to his feet, and stumbled forward. He finally got there, reaching for the handle, when Cedric retaliated. The Striking Curse to his back forced him to his hands and knees, and the Hufflepuff surged forward, reaching out for the cup, even as Harry dug his boots into the ground, bent his legs, and launched himself at the fallen prize...

Harry grabbed the left handle, Cedric grabbed the right. It was impossible to tell who had gotten there first.

As it turned out, it didn't matter. Harry, expecting to hear the roar of the crowd, expecting for this long and strange ordeal to finally be over, was severely disappointed. He felt a hook catch him behind his navel, and suddenly he was flying through the air, his hand latched to the Cup's handle, Cedric's body being buffeted by the same air currents directly across from him...

They slammed into the ground with tremendous force, both boys losing their handle on the Triwizard Cup, which rolled down a slight incline, coming to a rest about a meter away from Harry's outstretched hand, surrounded by a faint blue glow.

They had arrived at the edge of a dark and forbidding graveyard, irregular tombstones rising out of the uneven ground. In the distance, Harry could make out the dimmed lights of some kind of town. The ground he lay on was damp and cold, and thick mist hung over the immediate area. He heard Cedric groan. Rolling over, Harry watched the older Hufflepuff sit up, staring around at their surroundings in confusion. He turned and looked at the now dimmed Triwizard Cup.

"A portkey?" Cedric gasped. Harry slowly got to his feet. "Is this part of the Task, or..."

"Dunno," Harry said. His wand was already out. He didn't like this. He didn't like this one bit. "We've got to get out of here. Something's not *right*." His scar itched slightly, raising his suspicions. The hostility that had existed in the closing moments of the Final Task had all but vanished, replaced by concern for their mutual safety. Both of them must have had the same feeling that something was very much amiss.

Cedric didn't respond immediately. Then, he turned around and opened his mouth to say something.

At that instant, Harry's scar erupted. The reality of the situation he now found himself in slammed down upon him, and the reasons for his feelings of uneasiness abruptly became painfully clear.

Oh, Merlin...no...

A/N: Well, quite a bit happened in that chapter. While I certainly could have veered far, far away from canon, I didn't. Cedric and Harry still end up in the graveyard. The way they get there, and the way the others don't was changed, but the end result remains the same. I thought a lot about that, but sometimes, you've just got to go with the original.

The first part of this chapter was really intended to give you an appreciation of the relationships within Harry's little group of friends. There's tension, anxiety, and plain strangeness. Harry is the clear leader, and that has more to do with the force of his personality than weakness on the part of the characters.

Indeed, reading back through reviews of past stories (and the stories themselves), I hope it's clear how much things have changed. Harry was at first passive, because he understood he was in a bad situation without allies. Now, he has allies. He's made amends with Snape. He's humiliated Malfoy more than once. His power has been on full display. And while it's making him a tad bigheaded, it's also bringing out the stronger parts of his character. Harry is a Slytherin. Not exactly your run of the mill Slytherin, but a Slytherin nonetheless. He'll make a statement when it's appropriate, but he'll put a great deal of thought into it. He'll try to gain an understanding of others so that he can make them do what he wants. Call it manipulation, because that's what it is. But Harry isn't just a cold Slytherin either. He's compassionate, he tries to be understanding, and in pursuing his own goals, he tries to help others, like he's done with Neville.

I understand that I haven't created as likable a Harry as the one Rowling wrote. It's easy to feel sorry for Rowling's Harry, with his abysmal home life, his status as an orphan, his initial lack of familiarity with the world he calls home, and the fact that he's the textbook definition of a reluctant hero.

GM Harry's fundamentally different, and I always intended it to be that way. Canon Harry was ultimately able to make the entire war a battle between himself and Voldemort. GM Harry doesn't have that choice. He lacks the "saving people mentally" that canon Harry has, although he has a soft spot for those cast out and tread upon by

others, due to the way he was treated during his first year. And he's decided that by helping the people he thinks he can trust get better, he can further his own aims. He's also keenly aware that he'll need help...a lot of it.

At this point, Harry has focused mostly on recruiting purebloods. Indeed, a great deal of his thinking has revolved around them. It might seem as though purebloods are the only thing that matters to him. That's not true, and his underlying doubts are brought out in his conversation with Muggle-born Mary Lochley, a character that I only recently decided to insert into the story, but one that I feel has a great deal of potential. Needless to say, this won't be the last time these two cross paths. And before Lochley is hit with the label of "Mary Sue," understand that her character isn't nearly done developing. Indeed, as a Muggleborn, she lacks the confidence of a Daphne Greengrass. Her ambition and fierce desire to prove herself worthy is what landed her in Slytherin. She's pretty bright, but she's not just a Slytherin version of Hermione. The point is that I wouldn't jump to conclusions about her because I haven't figured out exactly who she's going to be yet.

The Light, the half-bloods, and the Muggleborns are all important as well, and Harry's essentially been forced to realize that. Because if he relies too heavily on the Dark purebloods, he'll anger the Light, and alienate pretty much everybody else. Harry's started with the Dark because A) As a Slytherin, in the year he happens to be in, that's the most practical beginning, B) Aiden Greengrass sought him out, and C) He's shown a certain tendency toward Dark magic. So it's a natural association for him.

So, you also got a little overview of where all the main characters are in terms of magical training. Hermione has a trademark Hermione moment with the stone-throwing spell. It occurred to me that wizards ought to be able to use their ability to conjure things to create weapons. And I've seen it employed to great effect in other fics. Ginny's powerful. Not on the same level as Harry, of course, but only Dumbledore and Voldemort can really claim to be that powerful. She's determined, and ferocious. Sometimes it's necessary to tear down a character to rebuild them. That's what I think I've done with Ginny. Her estrangement with her family, her experience in the Forest,

and what essentially amounts to an apprenticeship under Harry has fundamentally changed her. She's still mortal. Indeed, it was her brush with death in the Lake that prompted Harry's question about her to Luna. And, of course, that leads us to another really important part of this series.

Surprise! Luna isn't perfect. Really, that shouldn't be a surprise, but anyway...she screwed up big time. You have a bit of a better idea of *what* she is, although her mental powers are quite far reaching. For her, it's truly a blessing and a curse. Harry is the only one that really knows the real Luna. Luna *is* a reluctant hero. She's always been content with staying in the background. After all, she doesn't really need friends when she knows the thoughts of everyone around her...or so she thinks. Clearly, that's not the case. In her quest to be the ultimate impartial observer, she was passive when she should have been active. Luna doesn't just blindly enter the minds of others, though she'll do it when she thinks it's harmless. Obviously, those being scanned would probably feel differently, but that's beside the point. She knew something was off about Moody, but she decided not to become involved. And now three people are dead, including a nine-year old girl. Luna's going to have a breakthrough movement soon enough. She needed a breakdown movement too. While Luna will never be "normal" as JKR's Luna becomes when threatened, she's going to be a little different. My thought is that the Sorting Hat put her in Ravenclaw because her mother was one, and she lacked the courage of a Gryffindor or the ambition of a Slytherin. And does Luna really seem like a fit for Hufflepuff? So her placement was more a process of elimination than a result of her possessing certain strong qualities of any House. And she's quite bright...just not in a conventional sense. But rest assured, her failure to save Gabrielle is going to motivate her a great deal in the future.

The Third Task wasn't exactly a chore to write, but it lacked the emotional punch of the proceeding scene. I kind of beefed-up the Screwt - it probably sounds more like a scorpion now, but I couldn't resist the idea of a flame-throwing tail. Then Harry showed why he's a Slytherin and not a Gryffindor. Then, in lieu of the Sphinx, you have the Runespoor. That idea kind of just drifted into my head, and I liked it. It might seem rather pointless, but while I don't characterize Dumbledore as manipulative, he isn't averse to making his own

suggestion that Harry seek more peaceful solutions to his problems. Hence, a creature only he could overcome, but not by fighting it. If he set up the PS obstacle course for the benefit of the Trio, is it all that unreasonable?

Krum and Fleur get a rather raw deal in this book, and I want to make it clear that neither one of them is a weak character. Especially Fleur, who admittedly is downright pathetic in this chapter., breaking down in front of the boggart. She's skilled, smart, and powerful, but she's also suffered a tremendous emotional blow. All four of the Champions have been under tremendous pressure, and Fleur couldn't take it. She'll bounce back, because she's too proud not to. Krum, though experienced in the ways of professional Quidditch, doesn't have a fraction of the experience of Harry, so yeah, he can't throw off the Imperius Curse. Harry's the exception, not the rule.

Alecto was able to sneak up on Daphne because while Daphne's family line carried an ability to sense magical signatures, Alecto's carried an ability to hide them. The use of magic changes all of that, which is why Daphne could sense them last year in the Forest. They can't hide their signature when they're firing off powerful curses. I think it's a little more obvious why Crouch had to die. Daphne would undoubtedly insist that she bring the Cup into the maze. And Daphne knew Moody better than just about anybody. That added paranoia contributed to Barty snapping.

Harry and Cedric's rather violent race for the Cup might seem a bit OOC, but I'm not convinced. Harry has suffered terribly, and he's determined to make it mean something. On the other hand, Cedric desperately wants to win Hufflepuff House the recognition he feels it deserves. Harry played dirty first, and Cedric just sunk to his level out of desperation. Both are intense competitors, and both are highly motivated. And they are still friends, or at least friendly.

Again, the Graveyard chapter is just plain intense. Voldemort's a sadistic psychopath, Harry's an exhausted, outnumbered, and just frightened teenager. Oh, and the presence of a certain someone isn't going to make things any nicer. Wormtail's got help.

PLEASE READ AND REVIEW! I CAN'T ADDRESS YOUR CONCERNS IF I DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY ARE!

Thank You.

Chapter 22: Resurrection

“Cedric...run!”

Those were the only words Harry could get out as he fell to his knees, both hands squeezing his skull. His head felt it had been cleaved in two. He fell forward, then rolled onto his side, desperately trying to stop the pain, his legs twitching and flailing as he bit back a scream.

“I’m *not* leaving you here, Harry!” Cedric yelled at him. His voice seemed to be coming from a long distance away. “What’s *wrong* with you? Where are we? Why are you-”

“*He’s here,*” Harry gasped, fingers clawing at his scar almost involuntarily. “You have to go...get help...now!”

“*Who’s* here, Potter?” Cedric growled, kneeling beside him, staring hard into the younger boy’s eyes. “I’m not going to just abandon you. I won’t-”

“What’s *this?*” a horrible, cackling voice spoke from a short distance away. “*Two* ickle babies?”

“Go...” Harry hissed. “Please, *GO!*” he practically shrieked. He knew what was coming next, what *had* to happen next. Cedric had just left his field of vision as he squeezed his eyes shut. He heard what he thought were the signs of feet pounding on the ground, what might have been a scuffle, incoherent screaming, and then Cedric’s bone-chilling shriek of agony.

Harry finally succumbed, and fell into the abyss...

As he slowly awoke, Harry became aware that someone was dragging him across the ground. A pair of firm hands looped under his armpits, and his feet bounced as they were pulled across the uneven ground. He tried to force his eyes open. His body was horribly weak, almost paralyzed. He was unable to resist as he was shoved against a hard, flat surface, and then felt ropes being wrapped around his torso, holding his arms to his sides. Almost as an afterthought, the cloaked figure that he just finished binding him pulled the phoenix-feather wand from his wrist holster, shoving it into his robes. Harry

glanced up for a moment, and caught a brief glance of the terrified, but determined visage of Peter Pettigrew.

“Sorry, Potter,” he said. Harry wasn’t sure if he really meant it.

He tried to take in the scene around him. He realized that he was in a graveyard, and that the object he was bound to was almost certainly a tombstone. Several meters in front of him was a yew tree, with more tombstones pushing up through the ground in the distance. This graveyard was not a pre-planned collection of graves, arranged in regular rows and columns. This graveyard was older, one abandoned to the ravages of time.

Harry desperately tried to make sense of this even as he attempted to take stock of his surroundings. As he did, Pettigrew dragged a large cauldron into view, setting it up next to the strange tombstone. Liquid sloshed over the side as he maneuvered it into place. He lit a fire beneath it, and the contents immediately came to a boil.

Harry was suddenly struck by a terrible thought. A cascade of questions slammed down on him. *What had happened to Cedric? Who was that woman? Why was he here? What was that cauldron for?*

“*Faster, Wormtail,*” a sickeningly familiar voice hissed. “*My time approaches...*”

The voice seemed to have come from a previously-unnoticed bundle of cloth at the base of the yew tree. Harry was immediately assaulted by flashbacks of Bertha Jorkins’s murder, of the long, thin, black-and-red scaled arm that had directed the snake...that had directed *him* to bite the helpless woman, only after wielding a wand to torture her into consciousness. Was *that* what was concealed inside the bundle? Harry wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to find out.

The burning in his scar had been reduced from a sharp pain to a dull throbbing one, and his mind began to clear. He was bound to a marble headstone, the cords around his arms and legs tied so tightly that they were close to cutting off his circulation. His range of movement was extremely limited. Unable to do anything to improve his situation, Harry was compelled to simply watch as the macabre

ritual unfolded before him. He felt as if he was covered in a cold, wet blanket of magic that kept him from using his own abilities.

Peter seemed hurried, yet unusually focused. He kept glancing over his shoulder, as if expecting the presence of another. It didn't make all that much sense until Harry saw Cedric Diggory's body shoved roughly onto the ground. He moved slowly, moaning softly, telling Harry that he was still alive. He glanced up at the hooded figure that came up behind the fallen Hufflepuff, a wand clutched in an almost-skeletal hand. Another hand emerged, and together they pulled back the cowl of the figure's hood. It fell behind the head, revealing...

Another surge of revulsion. Standing over the body of Harry's friend, the flickering light from the fire burning beneath the cauldron casting her features into demonic relief, was a tall, slender woman with a face that Harry had only seen in books of magical history, but whose tendencies and crimes he was intimately familiar with. Now he knew where that awful voice had come from.

Bellatrix Black Lestrange had once been beautiful, but a lifetime of Dark magic and chronic malnourishment during her long captivity in Azkaban had robbed her of that beauty. Her black hair was tangled and cast lazily over her shoulders, her heavily lidded eyes sunk back into her skull, her skin deathly pale in the moonlight. She laughed as she saw him sitting there, revealing a mouthful of broken teeth yellow with rot.

Her presence here baffled him more than anything else about these strange and horrifying circumstances. As far as she knew, she was still incarcerated in the Maximum Security Wing of Azkaban prison, with only the disinterested guards, her tormented comrades, and the Dementors themselves for company.

Clearly, his knowledge was a bit out of date.

As if sensing his confusion, she smiled at him. "Surprised to see me, aren't you, *ickle baby Potter?*" Her voice took on a horrifying child-like tone, an innocent high-pitched quality that made his blood freeze in its veins.

After Evan Rosier, Bellatrix Lestrange had been the Dark Lord's most trusted advisor and feared enforcer. Her cruelty and brutality were legendary, as was her talent with wand and magic. One of the finest duelists of her era, she had defeated more than a dozen Aurors, subjecting them to untold horrors before they were finally executed. To those that knew of her, her role as the ring-leader of the group that had attacked and tortured the Longbottoms following Voldemort's fall had come as no surprise. She had outright refused to renounce her allegiance to her departed master, and had gone to Azkaban upright and proud. So too had her husband by a loveless arranged marriage, and her brother-in-law. The capture of the Lestranges had been a tremendous victory for the Light, and, coming in the wake of the fall of Voldemort himself, had probably been the impulse that drove the remaining Death Eaters underground, either into hiding or back into the public eye, bringing with them frightful tales of being *forced* to commit unspeakable acts while under the Imperius Curse. The new and opportunistic government that won control of the Ministry of Magic under the leadership of Cornelius Fudge had jumped at the chance to sweep the remnants of Voldemort's reign of terror under the rug...upon the receipt of the appropriate bribes, of course. Dumbledore and the others could do little about the unforgivable breach of justice. The wizarding world was sick of war and death, and perfectly willing to accept their new Ministry's assurances that Voldemort and his followers had been vanquished.

"The Dark Lord is very *generous* to those that serve him faithfully," she said speaking in a harsh whisper. "A lifetime of loyalty...and a need for my *services* was all it took." She laughed again. "It's quite a joy to finally be *free*. Captivity isn't all *that* bad, but after a while, you just start to miss the feeling of controlling your own destiny."

"*Bella*," a voice hissed in warning. A slight scowl crossed the woman's face, but it was gone in an instant. Almost absentmindedly she kicked Cedric in the side, causing him to cry out in pain.

Peter's preparations were now complete. Taking a deep breath, the traitor moved to the bundle of robes, lifting it from the ground. Harry thought he'd be prepared for what met his eyes as the robes fell away, but the hideous, red-scaled, skeletal infant that Peter gently carried in his shaking arms still made him feel like he was going to be sick.

Pettigrew held the tiny form over the cauldron, and for an instant, a pair of crimson slits locked with Harry's own eyes, sending a stab of blinding pain through his scar. Then Peter lowered the form in, eventually dropping the hideous mockery into the potion with a loud splash. Peter jolted back in terror, but he calmed as no punishment came for his error. Somehow Harry knew that his prayers that the abomination might be drowned by the frothing solution would go unanswered.

Bellatrix had shoved Cedric's body up against the yew tree and joined Peter on the other side of the cauldron. "Shall we begin?" she asked.

Before Peter even had the chance to answer, LeStrange had raised her wand. She took a deep, exaggerated breath, then spoke in lazy, almost bored tone. "*Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!*" Her shriek echoed into the night, and Harry felt Dark magic permeate the air, swirling around him faster and faster, building to a crescendo. The air stank with the odor of burnt flesh.

The ground in front of Harry cracked, and a thin stream of pale dust emerged from the ground, floating in front of him, before at Bellatrix's direction, it flung itself into the cauldron where it crackled and emitted a bright blue flash. Harry noticed out of the corner of his eye that Cedric was stirring again. His eyes gradually opened, abruptly widening in horror at the sight before him. His body stiffened, and he began slowly moving away, using his arms and legs to push himself backwards, trying to avoid detection. At the last, he failed.

Bellatrix calmly strode over to him, a look of irritated contempt on her face, and spat, "*Petrificus Corpus!*"

Cedric's body was frozen in mid-movement, his eyes instantly seeking out Harry's, wide with fear. "I won't have you *interrupting* such a *momentous* occasion, boy," she hissed. "You will watch and you will wait, like the *well-behaved* child that your parents raised, just like Potter over there. Feel *fortunate* that I have not yet decided to put you out of your misery."

Her task accomplished, she moved back to the cauldron, nearly knocking over Wormtail as she passed him. The man was utterly

terrified, both of what he was doing and of the people involved. “Your turn,” she said, turning to him.

“But I thought we agreed...”

“*Consider it a test of your loyalty, Wormtail,*” the cold voice hissed. It was coming from *inside* the cauldron.

The quaking man gave a jerky nod, then pulled a knife from his robes, holding it unsteadily in his left hand. He stared at Bellatrix, as if seeking approval. She nodded, a demonic smile cracking her face. She was *enjoying* this.

“*F-f-flesh of the servant, w-w-willingly g-g-given – you will – r-r-revive – your master!*” Wormtail finished the oath with a gasp, then gripped the dagger tightly in his left hand and swung it upward. Harry closed his eyes almost involuntarily as he figured out what Wormtail was about to do, not opening them until after the man’s shrill cry of pain had split the night, until after the sickening splash of his severed right hand plunging into the cauldron. A blinding, burning red flash nearly blinded him all over again as he forced his eyes open, and Wormtail fell back, sobbing as he held his bleeding wrist to his chest, gasping and moaning as he fought back another cry of pain. The Dark magic again began to swirl faster and faster, permeating the air, corrupt, dirty, and malevolent. Bellatrix threw Wormtail a disgusted look, then turned her eyes to Harry. A malicious smile lit her face.

She moved around the cauldron, coming toward him. Soon she was looming over him, as he tried to force his head backward so that he could see her face. She bent down in front of him and roughly yanked his right hand away from his side. Then she drew back and slashed his palm with a claw-like hand, breaking the skin. Warm blood flowed over his fingers, and she pushed a small rag into his injured palm, soaking up as much blood as possible.

She stared into his eyes as she spoke. “*Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken, you will resurrect your foe!*”

She got to her feet, even as Harry strained against his restraints, fighting back his own cry of anguish. The Dark magic howled louder now, almost blinding his senses. The wounds on his hands burned as

if there had been some kind of mild poison on Bellatrix's nails. Which, knowing the woman's reputation, was a perfectly reasonable assumption. Regardless of the reasons, it *hurt*.

But any pain he might have been in from his bleeding palm was immediately forgotten as Bellatrix wrung the blood-soaked rag out over the cauldron, allowing several drops of his blood to hit the boiling contents. Her cry of ecstasy and exhilaration rang out into the darkness as the cauldron flashed a blinding white, blacking out the night around them. The Dark magic finally came to a climax, and for an instant, all of his senses were cut off. A frigid chill fell over the graveyard, and he shivered uncontrollably.

A surge of steam erupted from the cauldron, blocking out his view of Cedric, of Wormtail, of Bellatrix, of all of his immediate surroundings. And then a silhouette began to rise out of the cauldron, a thin figure shooting higher and higher into the night. Harry's scar exploded, the pain again blocking out his other senses. He bit back a scream.

Through a haze of pain and half-closed eyes, he saw the skeletal figure step out of the cauldron, his naked body glistening in the moonlight. Harry's mind tried to deny what he was seeing, tried to somehow rationalize that the most powerful Dark Lord in centuries had *not* just risen from the ashes nearly thirteen years after he had been presumed dead.

"Robe me."

Gently, almost lovingly, Bellatrix retrieved the bundle of black cloth at the base of the yew tree and helped her master into them. She pulled back shyly, as if she was reluctant to be so physically close to her Lord.

The man stretched out his new body for the first time, running his spider-like hands over his chest, then turned sharply to face Harry, who remained helplessly bound against the tombstone. His skin was pale, white as chalk. "My wand," he said, still staring at the boy before him. His face was flat and snake-like, his eyes brightly-burning red slits that seemed to stab into Harry like a pair of sharp fangs. Harry's body was frozen in its current position, a burning pain slowly growing inside his forehead. He could not speak, even if he had wanted to. He

was completely captivated by the visage of the Dark Lord, unable to resist the macabre lure of his serpentine features and the aura of his tremendous power.

Bellatrix returned to his view, reverently carrying a slender shaft of wood in her hands, and delicately handed it to Voldemort. Pettigrew continued to hide in the background, turned away from the action, horrified by what he had been a party to. But this did not escape the Dark Lord's notice, as he might have hoped. "Come closer, Wormtail. Witness our triumph." He finally broke eye contact with Harry, relinquishing his hold on the Boy-Who-Lived's body. His eyes instead found the frozen form of Cedric Diggory, lying stiffly beside the yew tree. Harry could see the terror creeping into those defiant blue eyes. "And who is this?" he asked. "I asked only for only one. I wanted Potter, of course."

"An unintended witness, my Lord," Bellatrix said. "I felt it proper to continue with the ceremony despite his presence. If you so wish, I shall dispose of him."

"Not yet, Bella," Voldemort said. Harry had an awful feeling about where this was going. "What is his name?" he demanded, turning to Harry.

His lips moved on their own, despite his conscious resistance. "Cedric Diggory," his voice groaned. Harry tried to build up his Occlumency shields, to fight the Dark Lord's control of his mind, but it was a losing effort. He was too strong, and Harry was far too weak.

"Diggory?" Voldemort repeated. "I know that name. A *fine* lineage of Light wizards. A line of weak-minded *servants* to the Ministry. So this is the latest of them? A pity. You are a strong, handsome young man, Cedric." He laughed darkly. "Be honored, boy. My magic is tired and untested."

He lazily waved his wand at the frozen Hufflepuff. "*Finite*."

Free of the Body-Freezing Spell, Cedric immediately recoiled and began backpedaling away from the risen Dark Lord. Bellatrix was behind him in a flash, yanking him up by the back of his robes, forcing

him onto his knees. He resisted, but stilled as she brought a knife to his throat, whispering something in his ear.

Harry watched helplessly as Voldemort carefully examined his wand, searching for imperfections or flaws. Finding none, he drew his arm back, the tip of his wand pointed at Cedric's chest. Harry looked into Cedric's eyes and saw anger and defiance, but more than a little fear. His body was stiff and upright. "I'm not afraid of you!" he declared, though his shaking voice said otherwise. Bellatrix slapped him hard, jarring his head to the side. Harry raged silently at Cedric for not remaining quiet. What happened next was eminently predictable.

"*Really?*" Voldemort hissed, sounding irritated. "You *should* be. *Avada Kedavra!*"

A sickly green jet of light exploded from the tip of his yew and phoenix feather wand, striking the Hufflepuff in the chest. He stiffened, and there was a strange flash behind his eyes. Then his body went limp in Bellatrix's grasp. The woman released her grip, and the lifeless corpse slumped forward. Voldemort casually levitated the body and sent it soaring into the night, discarding it like an unwanted piece of rubbish. It landed with a soft thump some distance away.

Harry's body was frozen, unable to react, unable to accept what was happening. The anger and despair caused by Cedric's death fought for their release, but Harry held them back, unwilling to give the man the emotional display he desired.

A massive snake slithered into view, moving around the feet of his master, welcoming him back into this life. He paid it little heed. "Such is the fate of those that defy me, Harry," he hissed softly. "His defiance earned him nothing but a swift end to his pathetic life. Surely you will not also need to learn that lesson."

"*Bastard,*" Harry hissed. His head was forced upward at an uncomfortable angle, and he shut his mouth. The grip was released, but he continued to glare daggers at the man – if he could still be called that – while also looking for possible avenues of escape. His ordeal, he knew, was just beginning.

“Come here, Wormtail,” he said. The frightened man stumbled into view, and Harry saw a brief flash of disappointment in Bellatrix’s cold eyes as he stopped in front of their master. “Give me your arm.”

Peter offered the bleeding stump, shaking violently.

Voldemort hissed tiredly. “The *other* arm, fool.”

Peter held out his left arm. Voldemort turned it over, forcing the sleeve of his robes back past the elbow, then stabbed a white forefinger violently at the skin, into the reddish-black tattoo of a snake slithering from the mouth of a skull. Harry’s scar caught fire, and his own strangled cries joined those of James and Lily’s betrayer as Voldemort held a slender finger against the man’s Dark Mark. Powerful Dark magic flashed outwards, calling out to the faithful. He released Wormtail’s arm, and before the man stumbled away, Harry saw that his Mark was now a jet black.

He turned to Bellatrix. “Already, one of my closest servants has rejoined me. I brought her here, releasing her from her prison, because another had already failed. I could hardly entrust Wormtail with a task of such tremendous importance.” He looked at Harry now. “There is another, of course. The one that arranged for you to be here tonight. The one that still waits at Hogwarts, awaiting my orders.”

It *couldn’t* be Snape, Harry knew, and Karkaroff was out of the question as well. He’d never survive a reunion with the men and women who had been imprisoned by his frightened testimony. Even if he still admired or respected Voldemort, the fear for his own life would keep him away from working for the man. Someone else had infiltrated them, someone tasked with finishing what Crouch had begun. Someone else had turned the Triwizard Cup into a portkey, and placed the Imperius Curse upon Viktor Krum, the latter most likely done to incapacitate both him and Cedric and insure that Harry reached the Cup first. Perhaps Fleur’s encounter with the boggart had also been pre-arranged. Or perhaps they’d wanted to see if Harry would stop to help Cedric, and what he would be willing to do to an ally like Krum to stop him.

It was *all* a test, Harry knew. Blaise had been more right than he could have possibly imagined.

And to his intense dismay, Harry now knew that he had passed that test.

Now, he faced a far more daunting task. He would need to survive, alone, helpless, at the mercy of the Dark Lord and the flock of his followers that were at the very moment on their way here, to answer their master's call.

"Do you know where you are, Harry? Do you understand why you are here, of all places? It is because you sit upon the grave of my father, a cowardly, foolish Muggle. A man who cast out his wife when he learned that she was a witch, and that she was pregnant with his son."

Voldemort paced in front of him. Bellatrix's eyes followed his every movement. The depth of her devotion went beyond intense loyalty, beyond obsession. She was in love with the man...well, to the extent that a woman as cold and cruel as she could feel love. She wasn't just *willing* to die for him, but would do it *gladly*. But as he revealed the secret of his parentage, Harry caught a brief flicker of shock in those eyes. No, she hadn't been expecting *that*.

By contrast, Peter had fallen to the ground, sobbing weakly, cradling the stump of his right wrist. Voldemort ignored him. He looked like a lost, frightened child, rolling around on the ground. It was a truly pitiful sight.

"My father was useless to me in life, but in death he has at least proved worthy of my attention. I never laid eyes upon him until the day he fell to my wand, shortly after I discovered my true identity. My mother died giving birth to me. I was left to grow up friendless and alone in a Muggle orphanage. It was some time before I learned that I was different from all the other children. My rise to power began with my journey to Hogwarts, and my introduction to the wizarding world itself. I never looked back."

His eyes flashed with cold fury. "Your mother died to save you, Potter. And my father, though long dead, played his own role in bringing me back from the dead, though he never knew it."

Harry refused to speak. "From the moment I was old enough to understand, I swore that I would find him and kill him for allowing my mother to perish as she did. I swore that I would erase his presence from this earth. I began by taking on a new, more fitting name than the one that my poor mother gave me. My father's name," he spat. "Tom Riddle. A plain name. A common name. A *Muggle* name. A name unworthy of the greatest Dark Lord that this world has seen for centuries. And so Lord Voldemort came to be."

The snake slithered through the grass, its tail passing close to his feet before it once again disappeared into the darkness.

He smiled, pacing back and forth again. "I find myself growing sentimental, reliving my own family history. But in the end, it does not matter. Watch, Harry, as my *true* family returns..."

Multiple pops and cracks of displaced air sounded all around them, as black-cloaked and silver-masked figures materialized out of thin air. They quickly moved to form a circle around their master. Several of them started to move forward. One of them knelt before him, then bent down and kissed the hem of his robes, murmuring an apology. Voldemort roughly jerked his robes away, letting the man fall to the earth, hissing disgustedly. "Get up, Lucius," he commanded. The man did as he was asked, rejoining the circle.

Voldemort surveyed the witches and wizards arrayed around him. Bellatrix and Peter had not yet moved to join them, as if unwilling to associate themselves with those that had renounced their master, those that had betrayed him.

"I am disappointed," he said. "Many of you are missing from the ranks. And those that are present stink of guilt and betrayal."

"Master, we felt it proper-" one of them began.

"*Silence! Crucio!*" Voldemort hissed. The man fell to the ground, writhing in pain, screaming. The other men recoiled backwards, terrified by the possibility that they would soon all face the same ordeal. Finally, Voldemort lifted his wand, releasing the fallen Death Eater.

"I do not wish to hear excuses, Avery," Voldemort said. "From *any* of you," he amended. "Thirteen years ago, we stood united. No longer, it seems. Your ranks are thinned, by death, by imprisonment, and by betrayal. But you are fortunate; today has been a fine day indeed, and I am feeling unusually merciful. I will not tolerate any further lapses of loyalty. Lord Voldemort does *not* forgive. But I am willing to forget the sins of the past...for *now*."

This news seemed to come as a tremendous relief to the men, who began quietly murmuring thanks. "Still, I find myself surprised that you have come here now, when none of you thought to search for me after my reported fall. I find myself somewhat baffled by the fact that one of my most reluctant servants was the first to find me, and bring me back."

"I *never* gave up hope, master," Bellatrix whispered quietly. "I *always* believed. There has *never* been one greater than you. If *anyone* could have conquered death, *you* could have managed it."

"Indeed, Bella," Voldemort said, his voice betraying a bit of affection. "Your loyalty to me remains unquestioned. I cannot say the same of the rest of you. Perhaps, in your crisis of faith, you sought out other masters? Such as that Muggle-loving fool, *Dumbledore*?"

The assembled Death Eaters let loose a cacophony of denials and curses, each assuring their master that they would never consider such a grievous betrayal of his trust. Whether Voldemort actually believed them wasn't entirely clear.

"My faith in you is further eroded by the knowledge that instead of rallying around it, you ran from the Dark Mark at the World Cup this summer. For if you had sworn your undying loyalty to me, why would you not rejoice at this symbol of my power?"

"Master," Lucius hissed, coming forward. "We did not run from you."

"Indeed?" Voldemort asked. "From whom, then, were you running?"

"The Grey Maiden and others set an ambush," Avery whispered. "We were routed, shamed. We were unprepared to fight."

Voldemort let loose a high, chilling laugh. "So you fear admitting disloyalty, and instead offer *cowardice* as an excuse for your actions?"

"Master, we-"

"I have heard enough," Voldemort said. "I no longer care about your reasons, about your explanations, about your excuses. It is past. It is done. It is forgotten, if not forgiven." He surveyed the masked men. "This time will be different. You will serve me, or you and your families will pay the price. Failure shall not be tolerated. Do you understand?"

They did.

"Now, it seems that in your rush to ensure my forgiveness, you have failed to notice my special guest. Yes, *he* is here. Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. As an infant, he was credited with my downfall."

Harry's stared into the night, almost hoping that if he didn't notice them, they might not notice him. But the eyes of the assembled Death Eaters were now drawn to where he sat against the tombstone, and more than one of them laughed at him as he struggled against his bonds.

"My Lord, how did you manage this *miracle*?" Lucius asked. "How did you return to us?"

"It is a long, fascinating story, Lucius," Voldemort said. "One that begins...and ends, with my young friend here. I came for Potter that night, thirteen years ago. I came to end his life, because I had reason to believe that he posed a threat to my power. I killed his father with little effort. His mother begged me to spare her son, to take her own, *filthy* Mudblood life instead. The foolish, desperate cries of a mother, I thought. I was *wrong*. Terribly, *terribly* wrong. After disposing of her, I turned my wand upon young Harry here, seeking to finish the job."

Silence echoed through the graveyard. Even Wormtail's moans of pain had stopped. Harry could hear nothing but his own breathing.

“It is impossible to describe what happened next. I felt pain beyond anything I had ever experienced, ever imagined possible. I was torn from this world, torn from my body, cast out as a weakened and powerless spirit.”

Again, he paused. The silence was deafening.

“His mother’s sacrifice left traces of protection upon him. Protection that I neither understood nor could overcome. From the moment that Lily Potter’s soul left her body, I could not touch her son. Until now, that is.”

He moved to Harry, and his scar began burning fiercely, pain tearing through his entire body. He fought to stay aware, to watch the scene in front of him. A thin, skeletal hand reached for his face, and the same forefinger that had activated Wormtail’s Dark Mark traced across his skin.

Harry had never known such pain. His flesh seemed to be dissolving at the Dark Lord’s touch. He could not contain his reaction, and let loose a shriek of agony that shattered the stillness of the night. The Death Eaters laughed, none more than Bellatrix, who cackled with glee at his suffering. Voldemort pulled back the finger. “As you can see, that has changed.”

There was more laughter from his servants, who were probably grateful to no longer be the focus of the Dark Lord’s attention.

“But in the end, my friends the work I had already untaken proved my salvation. You knew my goal then, to conquer death, to live forever. Though I suffered greatly, I had already transformed myself into something that could not truly die. My soul was capable of remaining in this world without a body to hold it. But I was powerless, impotent as the meanest ghost. I had to flee Britain, to find a place where I could regain my magic and find a way to return to body.”

He pulled out his wand, examining it again. “Tools such as this were useless to me, for in my weakened state I could not use a wand. I could not even grasp it, not without a corporeal form. But I found that I still had one power. I could possess the minds of others, feed off of their life energies, control them like puppets. First, I possessed

animals, but they did not last long. Then, as I waited in vain for my loyal servants to return to me, Fate smiled upon me. A weak, idealistic wizard was drawn to my hiding place by tales told by the locals. I seized his mind, and we became one. It was all the more fortunate that this man just happened to be a teacher at Hogwarts. I learned from him that the Philosopher's Stone was to be hidden within Hogwarts. At last, a means to reach immortality was at hand."

He sighed, almost in regret. "Alas, it was not to be. For despite my preparations, despite my presence within the school itself, my efforts were thwarted. Not by Dumbledore, who was unwilling to take action despite the fact that he was surrounded by signs of my imminent return. No, once more I was stopped by Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived...again. I must admit I underestimated him. I never expected a Potter to wear the colors of my own House, even one raised by the Grey Maiden herself. I did not think him capable of penetrating the defenses surrounding the Stone even with the help of his Mudblood friend. Despite my error, I very nearly succeeded, until the luck that had got me to the precipice of my triumph was at once reversed. My Killing Curse would have disposed of Potter had it not struck the very Stone he was trying to deny me. In the end, I paid dearly for mistakes. I was forced to abandon my host, and in my haste I destroyed the very item that I had coveted. And Harry Potter lived to fight another day."

He threw a glare at Harry, one that sent a fresh stab of pain through his forehead. "I returned to the Dark Forest once more, to heal, biding my time. For two years I waited, until I received the most unexpected of surprises. Wormtail, here, who had already faked his own death to escape justice, who had already botched his own attempt to abduct Potter, came to me, hoping that I might at last provide him with protection, in exchange for his services. I agreed, as his body was ill-suited for possession. But Wormtail was more than capable of following basic instructions. And so, with the help of a few obscure Dark rituals and potions, a bit of unicorn blood, and some venom from Nagini, I became well enough to travel. That was when Wormtail made what might have been a fatal mistake. He encountered a Ministry Witch, Bertha Jorkins. He managed to convince her to accompany him, then overpowered her and brought her to me. I learned much from her. I learned not only of the Triwizard

Tournament that was to be held that year, but also of an unexpected asset that I could use to put my plans into action. Despite her...damaged state, I kept her alive in the hope that she might yet be of some use to me."

"Finally, my preparations were complete. Wormtail, with the help of a few old friends, transported me back to Britain, along with our unconscious captive. I took up residence in my father's old Manor. As I gained strength, I began to plan the events that would lead to this night. With the help of Bertha Jorkins's information, I freed a former servant from his father's captivity, and in exchange, he agreed to help me. He successfully infiltrated Hogwarts, placed Potter's name in the Goblet of Fire, and ensured his participation in the Tournament."

Again, the Dark Lord turned his crimson eyes to Harry. "You might be wondering what I wished to accomplish by this, Harry. After all, with my agent in place, would it not be easier to simply order your death? But I decided against such rash action. I was too weak to reveal my presence on the continent. I had heard much about your accomplishments, heard rumors of the power you possessed...and how you had come to possess that power. In the end, I decided to test you for myself. I instructed my agent to raise the stakes of each task, to make the tasks more dangerous for you personally. If you were killed, then the problem would be dealt with. After all, I have many enemies. There was little point in obtaining your blood for this occasion if you proved too weak to survive my tests. But survive you did, Harry, despite all of the odds being stacked against you."

Voldemort broke his eye contact, and Harry took a deep, gasping breath. He'd found it nearly impossible to breathe while the man had been speaking to him. He didn't understand how Voldemort was so easily manipulating his body. Voldemort paced again, surveying the Death Eaters. "It seems that once again I failed to learn from my past mistakes. Bartemius Crouch Junior was powerful and intelligent. But he was also unbalanced. And he was frightened of what I might do to him if he failed. He decided to take matters into his own hands, and nearly single-handedly destroyed the entire operation when he attempted to kill Potter himself, and was captured. Fortunately, I had considered the possibility that age might have wizened Dumbledore, and took steps to insure that his capture would not lead to my own.

But with my agent dead, it seemed that the entire operation might unravel before I had a chance to stop it. However, I had one last servant, a woman who was both more than willing and capable of serving my needs.”

“It seems that I am once again in debt to you, Wormtail. As foolish and ill-fated as your attempt to abduct Potter was last year, your actions still left me with one more servant than would have otherwise had. And because of that, the original plan was able to go ahead...with some alterations.”

Pettigrew was on his feet now, but he was still shaking as he accepted his master’s praise. He seemed decidedly out of place amongst these hardened and experienced Dark witches and wizards. He was not an unwilling accomplice, for he had participated out of his own self-interest. But he wasn’t comfortable with his role either.

“I have told you before, Wormtail, that the Dark Lord rewards those that serve him well. And though you may have blundered your way to this moment, I am in your gratitude. Consider this as a token of my appreciation.”

Voldemort waved his wand, and a brilliant ball of molten silver formed in the air. Harry watched as it molded and shaped itself into a hand. It flew to Wormtail’s arm, and seamlessly attached itself to the stump of his wrist. Wormtail stared down at it in wonder. “Thank you, Master!” he cried, nearly weeping with joy. Any pity Harry might have felt for the man vanished at that instant. He dropped to the ground and kissed Voldemort’s robes, before getting back up and moving into the circle of Death Eaters. Bellatrix remained firmly inside the circle, at her master’s right side. Harry was all too aware that Voldemort’s long-winded explanation was fast approaching its end, and that the man would soon turn his attention to his bound captive. Again, he strained against the cords that held him, but they wouldn’t budge. And he felt far too weak to perform even the most basic magic. Voldemort’s cold, wet blanket of power was suffocating him, dampening his own talents and leaving Harry terrified and defenseless.

“And at last my long tale of misfortune comes to its triumphant end. Alecko Carrow performed the task I set aside for her. She transformed

the Triwizard Cup into a Portkey, and then arranged one last test for Harry. He passed it. And as I expected, Harry Potter reached the cup alive and intact. He brought an unexpected companion, who was easily dealt with.”

The memory of Cedric’s murder flashed in Harry’s mind, and he closed his eyes, trying to ward off the disturbing images.

“Bellatrix was able to escape captivity, as I had already regained control of the Dementors. One of their number was in fact waiting for me upon my arrival. As the reigning Dark Lord, their loyalty was assured from the beginning; they are my natural allies. The stage was set. The overture is now over. And now, my friends, the main act begins. In front of all of you, on this very special night, I shall vanquish my foe.”

He abruptly turned and slashed at Harry with his wand. Harry braced himself for the end. But rather than ripping his guts open, the motion merely severed the restraints binding him. He was on his feet in an instant, adrenaline flowing through his system. Of course, without a wand, and surrounded by people that wanted him dead, there was precious little he could do but stand there defiantly. “Give him his wand, Wormtail,” Voldemort commanded. The short man stumbled over to Harry, and the fourteen-year old snatched the proffered item from his grasp. Harry said nothing. *What was there to say, anyway?*

The circle of Death Eaters began to move back, opening up a small arena for the Dark Lord and his wounded, frightened challenger. Harry knew that the odds of him surviving this confrontation were close to nil. Voldemort had the edge in skill, training, and raw power. He didn’t even need his wand to bring Harry to his knees. Nonetheless, he wasn’t going down without a fight. His pride wouldn’t allow him to, if nothing else.

Voldemort had also taken several paces backwards, and Bellatrix had evidently rejoined her fellow Death Eaters, because it was now just the two of them inside the formation. “Surely the ward of Daphne Dressler knows how to duel,” he said. When Harry didn’t respond, he spoke again. “We begin with a bow, Harry.” He spoke to his adversary as if he was a small child.

Harry took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, trying to let his fear out with it. Maybe he was going to die. But he was going to die on his feet, fighting the bastard that had murdered his parents and ruined his guardian's life. He held his wand out in front of him, but would not meet Voldemort's eyes. He bent down ever so slightly, slowly, carefully. Voldemort looked somewhat surprised at this, and returned the gesture.

Harry had just pulled his wand back to deliver a Slicing Curse when he was hit with the Dark Lord's silent Cruciatus Curse. He dropped to his knees, and then fell to the ground, gnashing his teeth together, writhing on the ground as his body burned.

Voldemort lifted the curse, leaving him panting and nauseous. Almost as an afterthought, Harry's scar continued to burn dully. The Death Eaters' laughter filled his ears, echoing through the night. Harry slowly got back to his feet, his knees shaking, glaring daggers at his opponent.

"Disappointing..." Voldemort hissed. "*Crucio!*"

Harry had already begun his dive, and the blast of white light missed him, slamming into the ground with a bright flash. Harry slashed his wand hard at the Dark Lord, shrieking the incantation for the Slicing Curse. Voldemort slapped his curse aside with incredible ease. Harry fired again, this time a Blasting Curse at the reborn Dark Lord's feet, followed quickly by the most powerful Severing Curse he could muster. None of them even got close before they vanished into Voldemort's Servos Shield, which glowed a deep green as it consumed the energy of Harry's spells.

Harry leapt back to his feet, waiting for the Dark Lord's assault. He didn't wait long. The supercharged Cruciatus Curse, fed mostly by Harry's own magic, tore into his body and shattered his conjured shield like it wasn't even there. Harry was hurled backwards, slamming into the wall of Death Eaters, bouncing off them and landing in the muddy grass, where he writhed in exquisite agony. He prayed for death at that moment. It simply could not be worse than the pain he was experiencing. He couldn't even hear his own screams.

Then the pain vanished, as Voldemort once again released him. This wasn't a *duel*, Harry realized, emerging from his pain-induced haze. He was *toying* with Harry, *humiliating* him, using Harry as an example of what happened to those that defied him.

"To your feet, Potter," he hissed. Slowly, wondering how much more his abused and weakened body could take, Harry complied. He shook his bangs out of his eyes. It had begun to rain, and the ground was quickly becoming more treacherous.

"What do you want from me?" Harry demanded. "You've got me right here; you could just kill me and be done with it!" Taunting the man probably wasn't the best idea, but Harry wasn't sure he didn't prefer death to enduring another dose of Voldemort's Cruciatus. And escape was all but impossible.

Voldemort didn't respond with words. Instead he blasted several more Cruciatus Curses at Harry, who managed to dodge all of them, and even got off a Striking Curse, as useless as it proved. Voldemort lazily waved his wand to block it.

At that instant, he saw it. Just ahead and to the right of him, a crack in the line of Death Eaters. He could only hope that they were too distracted by the duel between him and their master to react. He fired a Slicing Curse at Voldemort's head, then spun around, aiming his wand at the break. "*EVANBERO!*" he bellowed. The supercharged Bludgeoning Curse smacked into the living wall, sending three or four unsuspecting Death Eaters flying into the air, and Harry took off for the gap he'd just created even as the others hurried to close it. He slipped through the breach, running for his life. He heard Voldemort's cry of rage, felt the heat from a curse on his neck as it missed him by centimeters. He wasn't sure how far he'd made it before he was hit in the back by the worst Cruciatus yet. His wand slipped from his fingertips as he collapsed forward onto the ground, his body going into uncontrolled spasms, his throat burning as he vomited. He felt blood dripping from his nose and ears. *That can't be good.*

By the time it was over, and he was once again released, Voldemort was standing over him, and the formation of Death Eaters had reformed around them. Harry was no better off than he'd been before

he'd attempted the mad stunt. Again, he prayed for death. His mind was fuzzy, his body hurt everywhere. He fumbled around for his wand, finally finding it half-embedded in the mud beneath him, as Voldemort began to taunt him again.

"That was foolish, Potter," he hissed. "Leaving the dueling ring is a great dishonor, you know. You paid the price. Now get to your feet, and we shall finish this. The only escape is death. You are a *wizard*, Potter. Do not dishonor your heritage by expiring in the dirt like some common *Mudblood*. I am giving you the chance to die on your feet. You should be thanking me for-

"Abrumpo!"

Harry's Slicing Curse, launched even as he lay prone on the ground, seemed to come as a complete surprise to his opponent, and Voldemort was unable to block it before it ripped into his left shoulder. Harry's aim had been wild, but it hardly mattered. A spray of blood erupted from the wound, the droplets seeming to fall to the ground in slow motion. Gasps of surprise rippled through the Death Eaters around him. They seemed uncertain, confused, and unable to believe that this boy had managed to inflict real harm on their master.

Voldemort did not cry out in pain. He hissed, and his eyes locked with Harry's, causing his scar to erupt in blinding pain that threatened to tear his mind to fragments. Harry hadn't yet recovered from the mental assault when the Dark Lord retaliated. His right arm, still outstretched, provided an obvious target.

"Diripio!"

A swarm of tiny razor-sharp blades tore into his arm, slicing through the fabric of his robes, his flesh, tendons, ligaments, even bones. The Flesh-Shredding Curse worked its way all the way up his forearm before expending its energy, but the damage was already done. Harry let out another shriek of pain, instinctively diving onto his wounded arm, which did little but cause him even more agony. He lay there, groaning, hissing, moaning, cursing. His eyes burned with tears. He waited for the end. It did not come.

“...as I was saying, you should be *thanking* me for allowing you to die a gallant death,” Voldemort continued, as if he’d never been interrupted. “A pity your body will be so badly *scarred* when I am done with it. I daresay your *friends* might not even recognize you. You have *disfigured* me, Potter. You have left your mark on my new body. And you *will* be made to regret that. Get up, *boy*. Get up and face your destiny.”

All I have to thank you for is pain, Harry thought. At that moment, knowing that he was about to die, a terrible rage overwhelmed all other conscious thought. He *embraced* it, and for an instant, he felt *nothing*. He made his decision, and forced his muscles to start working. He *ignored* the pain of his shredded forearm, the discomfort of his rain, sweat, vomit, and blood-soaked body. He *ignored* the fear, the feelings of helplessness that had threatened to overwhelm him. He focused every particle of his being on nothing but his *hatred* for Lord Voldemort, for *everything* that he stood for. Tucking his ruined right arm to his chest, grasping his wand in his left hand, Harry rose to his feet, magic pulsing through his body. Voldemort drew his wand back for what was sure to be the killing blow.

Not like this! Harry raged in his mind. *Not like this! If I’m going out I’m taking this bastard with me!*

“*Avada Kedavra!*”

“*CONFRIGO!*”

Two enormous blasts of energy burst out of the end of their wands at the same instant and collided in mid-air. But rather than the Killing Curse overwhelming the Demolition Curse and continuing on, rather than the energy of each spell canceling the other out, rather than a tremendous explosive release of magical energy resulting from the collision of two immensely powerful spells, fired by two immensely powerful wizards, there was instead a blinding flash of golden light. The sound of Phoenix song filled the air, and a thin golden streak of light now connected the wands of Harry and Voldemort. He felt himself being lifted off the ground, and saw that Voldemort was also being levitated, as the Death Eaters swarmed beneath them, desperately trying to aid their master. But the spells they fired into the

sky at him vanished upon contact with the expanding golden sphere that now enveloped the two duelists, as they hovered at least fifteen meters above the ground.

A expression of stunned disbelief was etched upon Voldemort's face. Beads of light began to form along the connection between their wands. And at that instant, Harry began to understand what was happening. Ollivander's caution played again through his mind, though the voice seemed to be coming from a long distance away...

"It is indeed curious that this would be your wand when its brother gave you that scar."

Shared wand cores. Extremely rare. Extremely unpredictable. And now that connection was all that held Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort high in the air, sealed inside some kind of impenetrable bubble. Harry knew that if this connection was broken, he'd most likely fall to his death. Even if he survived, he'd be too badly injured to fight back. He'd be literally torn to pieces.

Distracted by his contemplation of the events that had just transpired, Harry had failed to notice that the beads of light that he'd previously dismissed as unimportant had drawn alarmingly close. He was almost out of time. He didn't know what would happen if those beads touched his wand, but he couldn't imagine that whatever it was would be beneficial to his health.

Harry closed his eyes, and reached deep into his body, drawing his power outward, emptying his magical core. Instinctively, he began to channel raw energy along the connection. A grayish cloud pushed out from his body, forcing the beads back. Voldemort's eyes went wide with alarm as he saw what Harry was doing, and he began to push back. A black cloud in the shape of a serpent wrapped itself around his end of the connection, and quickly slithered up it, meeting the oncoming beads that were being shoved back by Harry's magic. The gap grew smaller, and smaller, and then their essences touched...

Harry didn't fully remember what happened next. All he knew was that he was suddenly being blasted through the air, his body feeling like it was on fire, surrounded by a colorful conflagration of light, as if the air itself was ablaze. He barely even felt the impact as he hit the

ground, saved by an instinctive Cushioning Charm. His landing was almost gentle, but his energy was fading fast. He forced his eyes open, unable to understand what was happening, and rolled over, staring off into the distance. He saw a brilliant inferno burning on a hill some distance away, and silhouettes against it, he saw more than a dozen black figures charging down that hill at his position, letting loose incoherent screams of rage. He recognized one of the voices. He reached back with his left hand, and touched cold flesh.

Cedric.

That meant he was back at the yew tree, near the cauldron, near the headstone. Near the...

He rolled over so that he could wrap his left arm around Cedric's, and discovered by some miracle that his wand was still clenched, intact, in his left hand. Aiming blindly into the darkness, he summoned the last of his magical reserves.

"Accio Triwizard Cup!" he cried. He stuffed his wand down the front of his robes, praying to some unknown divinity that he'd been successful. A glowing blue object came soaring through the air and met his waiting hand. His fingers closed around the handle. He felt a jerk behind his navel, and he was in the air again, flying away from his own personal hell, holding onto his dead friend and the cold metal of the cup's handle as if his life depended on it.

Which, of course, it did.

He closed his eyes as he hit the ground again. He briefly heard screaming, shouting, saw orange flashes through his closed eyelids. But his body could no longer take the strain, and his mind needed its own time to heal.

Harry Potter knew no more.

A/N: Yikes. I've put Harry through Hell before, but that was probably the worst of the lot, in terms of psychological, mental, and physical suffering. And yeah, such an experience is going to have its effects. You saw the intense rage contained within Harry, which is a really,

really important part of his motivation. He despises Voldemort. He's got no qualms about killing him. Indeed, that's what he tries to do (fans of Babylon 5 might have noticed my nod to Sinclair's declaration just before he decides to ram the Grey Council's cruiser). No Disarming Charms here. Had that Confrigo gone off, it probably would have killed Harry, Voldemort (at least his body) and most of the Death Eaters standing around them.

Again, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Cedric still dies, although less gently this time around, and the wand connection becomes a major factor in the outcome. Opted for the big explosion over the regurgitation of spells this time.

The Flesh-Shredding Curse is one of my nastier inventions. And yes, it's the same one Daphne used to turn Evan Rosier into bloody goo. Harry's arm looks like one would expect an appendage to look if a grenade went off next to it. Voldemort has a really big ego, and Harry can take advantage of that at times, although he paid dearly.

Harry was at a significant disadvantage the entire time, which is why he was so helpless. Voldemort is tremendously powerful, and at this point, far more adept at using his power to his own ends. He also exploited the mental link to keep Harry from resisting magically. When he let Harry resist, you saw the resulting fireworks. Power-wise, Harry, Voldemort, and Dumbledore are roughly the same. Skill-wise, Harry is worlds behind both of them. That's a problem. Dumbledore had over 100 years before he had to face Grindelwald. Harry's got less than 20.

What is Bellatrix doing there? Full explanation will have to wait until early in the 5th part of the series, but let's just say Fudge's incompetence is reflected by the people he keeps around him.

Note that I didn't have Voldemort name every single Death Eater. There's a reason for that. First of all, there were a lot more of them in the GM universe than in canon, and not all those that failed to respond are dead or imprisoned. Think Alecto and Amycus, who according to Snape were Death Eaters in the First War yet were not present at the graveyard in canon.

If you haven't noticed, I opened a forum just in case anybody felt like discussing my work.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS! I AM NOT A LEGILIMENS!

Chapter 23: Darkness Arisen

Harry's dead.

That thought pounded over and over again through the mind of Ginny Weasley as she fought against her own short stature, peering through the roiling and screaming crowd around her. These were the times that she wished she wasn't, quite literally, the Littlest Weasley. Ginny desperately tried to see through the mess of flailing limbs and fellow students whose bodies just happened to be a bit more vertically elongated than hers.

Things had begun to go wrong as soon as Bagman had made the announcement that both Harry and Cedric had reached the final chamber. The announcement that they'd reached the Cup itself had been followed by a lusty roar of approval from all four Houses of Hogwarts. But when the news of who had actually reached it first hadn't been announced, Ginny had started to worry. Despite the capture of Barty Crouch Junior over two months previous, all of them had feared that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named might still make his presence felt at the third and Final Task. And as the teachers began whispering in frightened and increasingly panicked tones, it seemed those fears had been realized. Dumbledore had ordered them to remain calm, and even Ginny had felt the magical power that had accompanied his command.

Waiting anxiously with Anne Grunitch and Melissa Quinn, as Hermione disappeared into the crowd in search of information, Ginny had seen multiple individuals entering the maze. Eventually, the unconscious, but alive, body of Viktor Krum had been pulled out, as well as a despondent Fleur Delacour. The level of noise had risen as Krum had been revived and begun wildly gesturing, spewing something in Bulgarian, a language as utterly incomprehensible to Ginny as any she'd ever heard. The teachers had begun steadily deconstructing the maze, and Hagrid had been sighted carrying away the body of a Blast-Ended Skrewt. In the course of Bagman's poor commentary, Ginny thought she remembered a mention of Harry fighting one of the things, but she wasn't sure. The maze was nearly gone now, but it seemed that Harry Potter, Cedric Diggory, and the Triwizard Cup had vanished into thin air.

Not likely, knowing Harry, Ginny had told herself. It's probably a lot worse than that.

Hermione had returned maybe twenty minutes later, near panic, her face blotched by tears and rage. She'd been unable to get into the Teacher's or Judge's Box, stopped at the latter by none other than her pompous and infuriating older brother, Percy, who assured her that the situation was well in hand. She hadn't even seen McGonagall or Daphne, the two people she'd been looking for. Hermione admitted she'd considered hexing Percy on the spot, but considering the confusion that was already creating wild rumors and disorderly conduct, including a fistfight between a few of the younger Gryffindors and Slytherins, she'd decided against it.

The evening had worn on, with no news or explanations. The Judges had evidently decided that keeping the spectators in the stands was the best course of action. Ginny wasn't so sure she agreed with them, especially after a frustrated Anne Grunitch had delivered a vicious uppercut to one of Ginny's male classmates, who'd apparently blamed Harry for the situation and called him something that Anne neglected to repeat

Then, all of a sudden, things started to happen.

A flash of blue light half-blinded her, but as soon as the afterimages faded, poor vision became the least of her concerns.

Ginny finally lost it, and shoved aside a taller Slytherin 5th year, desperate to see what was happening. Fortunately, as soon as the boy got a glimpse of what Ginny was staring at, he froze in shock, abandoning all thought of retaliation.

Two human forms had seemingly fallen out of the darkening sky, landing maybe twenty meters from where Ginny was standing. She recognized the mop of unruly black hair instantly, although there wasn't much else from which to identify Harry Potter, covered in muck and blood, and lying on his side, still as death, his right arm tucked under him, along with the limp arm of his fellow Hogwarts champion. His left hand still clutched a shiny object that appeared to be the Triwizard Cup. Diggory lay facedown, and though it was hard to tell at this distance, Ginny was sure he wasn't breathing. And when Harry

failed to move as stunned silence gave way to panicked screams, she became sure that her boyfriend wasn't either.

First to break loose from the spell of the boys' sudden and dramatic appearance was, unsurprisingly, Daphne Dressler, who leapt over the barrier and raced at full sprint for her ward's body.

Ginny had begun moving an instant later, but was yanked back as Hermione's hand grasped her flailing wrist. "Where are you going?" she yelled. Ginny stared back in disbelief. Where *e/se* could she possibly be going?

Ginny turned back to the field, and saw that Daphne had propped Harry's body up on her lap, and was currently fumbling with something she'd pulled from her robes.

Even as her fingers furiously dug for the vial, Alecko Carrow continued to deny what she was seeing. She had thought her task done after Potter had overpowered Krum (whom she had intended to use to stop Diggory, before the Hufflepuff had blasted a hole in a solid wall and then gotten lost.) All that remained was to continue to masquerade as the concerned Grey Maiden, desperately searching for her missing ward. As soon as the search was abandoned, she'd flee before the real Daphne Dressler awoke. Potter would be dead, her master would be restored, and she would have secured herself a prime place in her new order. If she could manage the time, she might even delay her departure long enough to cut Dressler's throat.

Instead, she was abruptly thrust into the role of a servant finishing what her master had started. Somehow, Potter had escaped the trap that had been laid for him, although given the severity of his injuries, it hadn't been easy. That her Dark Mark had burned fiercely fifteen minutes after Potter vanished meant that her Master had indeed returned. She'd been just about to depart, under the auspices of investigating a suspicion of hers, when Potter and Diggory had quite literally fallen from the sky. The port-key, which re-charged every half-hour until disabled, had somehow brought him back. And he was still *breathing*.

But Alecto was a practical woman. She knew that things might not go as smoothly as planned. She breathed a sigh of relief as her searching hand clasped her backup plan: a vial of specially brewed poison. She pulled it out, ripping out the plug. To all the world, it would appear she was attempting to revive her ward with some manner of healing potion. Instead, she was going to end this pathetic challenger's life.

She forced open Potter's mouth, and tipped the vial of clear liquid...

Ginny hadn't even noticed that she was there, but Luna Lovegood quickly made her presence felt with a loud gasp. Ginny turned, staring curiously at the enigmatic Ravenclaw and childhood acquaintance, (if not friend,) who seemed to enjoy a strange and rather unique relationship with Harry. Her protuberant blue eyes were wide with terrified disbelief. "Luna?" Ginny asked, trying to make herself heard over the crowd noise.

"Stop her. That's not..." Luna said, trailing off. Abruptly, she'd grabbed hold of Ginny's shoulders, and started shaking her violently.

"That's. Not. Daphne. Stop her, or he'll die!"

Ginny stared back at the other girl, trying to process what she was hearing. "Luna, what are you..?"

The Ravenclaw blinked, and looked toward the scene on the field, at Harry in Daphne's arms, at Cedric lying dead on the ground. Her face was a mask of concentration. Everyone else seemed hesitant to approach, even Cedric's Head of House, Professor Sprout. Ginny couldn't understand what was wrong, why or Luna was so alarmed...

Then, abruptly, she saw it. For an instant, Daphne's hair was not short and honey-blond but long and dark. The look on her face was not that of concern but cold determination. And her eyes were not gray-green but pale blue orbs full of malice and loathing.

Ginny jerked back in surprise. As she witnessed this bizarre mirage, she saw that the woman was holding an upturned vial to Harry's lips. Realization hit her like a thunderbolt.

NO!

She scrambled over the bleachers, knocking over Melissa in the process. Hermione's yell followed her as she stumbled and scrambled down to the edge of the stands. From the commotion and mumbled apologies also coming in Ginny's wake, her Gryffindor best friend was also trying to get out of the stands, making for the lowest point they could find. Bracing herself on the top of the barrier, Ginny pulled herself over it, dropping about a meter to the grass. She barely even felt the pain as her knees absorbed the impact. Scrambling desperately forward, she pulled her wand from her robes, but she never got the chance to use it.

A tremendous blast came from her right, and a fireball erupted from the base of the Teacher's Box, ripping a tremendous wound in the timber and canvas structure. When the inferno had faded, Ginny saw the *real* Daphne Dressler silhouetted against the gaping hole, bruised, disheveled, and *enraged*; her robes torn and soiled. Just as she was reputed, she acted decisively without the slightest hesitation. Ginny watched as the Grey Maiden's wand arced through the air in a short, quick slash. The front of her doppelganger's robes exploded in a shower of crimson, and the imposter slumped to the ground. Daphne stood there, wand extended, for a few more moments before she crossed the distance to her ward with long, measured strides, dropping to one knee, almost absentmindedly banishing the body of the woman she had just killed another three or four meters behind her.

Despite her fear of the woman, Ginny started moving and Hermione was right behind her. Daphne's face was a mask of anger and concentration. She swore as she examined the contents of the vial. "Snape. Find Him. *Now*," she snapped at Hermione.

"What should I tell him?"

"That he'd best be ready for anything, because I don't know what this poison is," Daphne said, her voice hard and strained. "*Now go!*"

Hermione didn't need to be told twice. Ginny's eyes drifted to Cedric's body, lying less than a meter away. Ginny could now see that his eyes were open and glassy, staring aimlessly at the ground.

"He's dead," Daphne said in a matter-of-fact voice, noticing her gaze. "Killing Curse. Ginny, help me lay him on his back," she ordered.

A part of Ginny wanted nothing to do with the woman, but the rest of her knew that at this moment, she was acting in Harry's best interests. Ginny did as she was told, trying to avoid touching the worst of her friend's wounds, though her hands still came away bloody. "Come on, Harry," Daphne said, sounding desperate, frantic. "You've made it through worse, you'll be okay. You've *got* to be...where the hell in Snape?" she demanded angrily.

"Here," came the voice of the Potion Master. Behind him were Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Flitwick, all wearing varying expressions of horror. Pomona Sprout pushed past them to Cedric's body. The plump, normally-pleasant woman was on the verge of tears, which then flowed freely as she knelt over the Hufflepuff. Hermione was also back, and quickly at Ginny's side. Over her shoulder, Ginny thought she saw Blaise Zabini, though she couldn't be sure.

Snape tapped the vial, which still held a bit of the poison, with his wand, and it glowed a bright red. "Ashwinder compound," he said. He tapped it again, lower on the vial, with a different wrist movement. "*And* Rockworm venom," he amended. "Creative."

"Can you save him or not?" Daphne asked. She sounded like she might hex him if he replied in the negative.

"Possibly," the man replied. "Move him to the Hospital Wing and get him stabilized. I'll run to the dungeons and find the correct antidotes. Quickly, now. While not extraordinarily fast-acting, indeed, more prized for difficulty of detection, both poisons are extremely lethal. When combined..."

"I get the picture," Daphne said. "Go." He did, racing back toward the castle, black robe and cape flapping around him like the wings of an overgrown bat. The Grey Maiden looked to Dumbledore, who was already in the process of turning a chunk of wood into a Portkey. Daphne grasped Harry's left arm; the right, as Ginny now saw, was a bloody mess.

"I want to come," Ginny blurted.

"No time," Daphne replied quickly. She grabbed the piece of wood from Dumbledore, and she was gone, leaving only a patch of ground soaked with the blood of Harry and the as-yet-unidentified Death Eater who had just been so brutally cut down. Flitwick was staring at that body now. With the woman's death, the effects of Polyjuice were nullified.

"Alecto Carrow," the tiny wizard said, sounding wistful. "A bright young woman, but one with a cruel streak and a bigoted family. A shame, really." McGonagall nodded along with him.

Ginny wasn't exactly in the mood for wistfully remembering the schooldays of the woman who had just attempted to murder her boyfriend. "Can Hermione and I go up to the castle?" she asked quickly.

Dumbledore hesitated for a moment, then nodded. Ginny grabbed Hermione's wrist and nearly yanked the larger girl off her feet. She fell into step behind Ginny as they ran up the path back from the Quidditch Pitch. Neville Longbottom joined them at some point. So did Blaise, and eventually Luna caught up with them. Together, the five of them raced for the Hospital Wing, desperate for news about their injured friend.

So this is how it begins, Severus Snape thought, his eyes flicking to the pale, unconscious young man occupying one of Madam Pomfrey's Hospital Wing cots. He was breathing freely now, although his color hadn't improved a great deal. Still, he was on the road to recovery, and that was more than could have been said several hours ago, when Potter came within minutes of expiring. Snape had been hard pressed to create a dual-action antidote to a pair of rare and complex poisons, but when his old Potions professor, Horace Slughorn, a man prone to stretching the truth, had told him he was the most talented Potions prodigy of his time, he hadn't been exaggerating.

He'd been able to save Potter's life, fortunate because Dressler had been worked up into a frenzy as the minutes ticked by. Considering

that the woman had already killed a Death Eater in the past hour, it wasn't much of a stretch to believe she might make him pay for his failure with his life. After all, it wasn't as though she needed anything but an excuse. She'd had him marked for death from the night of that...*incident* with Lily. An incident that he continue to regret like few other moments in his life. He had loved Lily Evans, he thought. At the least, he'd felt something for her that had never been duplicated in the years after her death.

Not that it matters any more, Severus thought, his eyes again falling on her son. He looked vulnerable, weak. He certainly did not conjure images of one that had just confronted the Dark Lord and somehow managed to survive. Though the particulars would remain a mystery until the young man's battered and abused body had healed, Severus's Dark Mark told him all he needed to know. As he thought about it, the underside of his left forearm ached slightly. He'd best accustom himself to that, and be prepared for far worse, for the foreseeable future.

So his master had returned. Potter had been present, and paid the price. His right arm remained wrapped in a white gauze glove that would need to be changed regularly, even as the strongest of Madam Pomfrey's Healing spells and potions fought the Dark magic of the spell that had created the horrible wounds. Underneath his pajamas was another wound on his left shoulder, and a variety of bruises, and two or three broken ribs. More subtle, but potentially also more damaging, was the severe trauma to his nervous system. Potter had been exposed to the Cruciatus Curse before, indeed he'd spent more time under the power of that Unforgivable than most Aurors three times his age. Even the most incompetent of his master's Death Eaters couldn't match him. Of course, most of them were executed before they had a chance to match his suffering. He'd been forced to endure the Dark Lord's own Cruciatus at the tender age of eleven, then that of his own guardian at twelve.

Once again, it seemed he'd escape without significant neural damage, but he needed to stop pushing the envelope. A few seconds either way could mean the difference between no long-term side effects and paralysis or insanity. Needless to say, if either of those fates were to befall the Boy-Who-Lived, the consequences would be quite

devastating. Namely, they'd be forced a war they had no chance of winning. Some might prefer a hero's death to a life without meaning, but Severus was not among them. Every moment he was still breathing was better than each moment he wasn't, no matter how he'd gotten to that rather permanent state.

Potter would probably regain full use of his right arm, although it would take quite a bit of time for the potions to re-grow his shredded tendons, ligaments, and bones. That it was his wand arm, and the forearm, at that, was significant to Severus. Assuming that the injury was inflicted by the Dark Lord, it was probably meant as punishment for an action by Potter. Like hitting him with a spell, for example.

And in the mind of Severus Snape, any fourteen-year old that could not only survive an encounter with the Dark Lord, but also manage to land a curse on him, was worthy of great attention. Even if his escape turned out to be a fantastic series of lucky coincidences, which, considering Potter's history, it might well be. As long as the young man *understood* that, and trained hard so that next time he might survive on skill and not blind fortune, that was. And Snape had no doubt that that would be Harry's precise reaction to the events of that evening, he was aware that the boy and his friends had been training in private for some time, although the particulars remained unknown to him.

He lamented that Dumbledore had banned him from using Legilimency on students after an incident about six years in the past, when a particularly irritating Ravenclaw named Nymphadora Tonks had figured out exactly how he knew she was planning to put a Babbling Hex on one of her Slytherin classmates' textbooks, to be activated as soon as Emmanuel Bulstrode opened it to a certain page. In fact, as Severus soon learned, the clumsy Metamorphmagus had staged the incident to test a theory. And, her suspicions confirmed, her mother, Andromeda Black Tonks, had been notified and promptly threatened to report him and Dumbledore to the Hogwarts Board of Directors, which back then had been chaired by an old friend of the disowned Black daughter. Dumbledore had since limited his Potion Master's use of the mental art to culling extra information while interrogating students for disciplinary violations, especially in the case of his own Slytherins. Well, he'd *also* used it to disorient and, if he

was honest with himself, torture the son of James Potter. Dumbledore had repeated Daphne Dressler's threat verbatim, which included promises of castration, an Entrail-Expelling Curse, and a bout with a fully transformed Remus Lupin. It had been enough to convince him to find other methods of extracting his petty revenge. He'd since learned better.

Unfortunately, Snape thought, Potter and his friends are quite good at escaping punishment for breaking the rules. And so long as I value my life, I'd best not intrude upon his mind outside of Occlumency lessons until Dressler lies six feet under.

And Snape wasn't all that diligent about disciplining members of his own House either, even if he could find an excuse. He'd been inside Potter's mind, of course, during their Occlumency sessions, but he'd been on the prowl for far more...*significant* things.

Snape supposed it hardly mattered. Potter was as trained as the most tutored Pureblood, and possessed tremendous power to go along with it. Power that still unnerved Severus. He'd been a careful observer of the duel between his own Godson and Potter, a confrontation that occurred because Lucius's son had hideously misread the situation and committed an unprovoked and unwise attack on Potter's Muggleborn best friend, the insufferable Gryffindor know-it-all, Hermione Granger. Draco had managed to put up a fight, evening managing to knock Potter to the ground by displaying a curious aptitude for silent spell-casting, but Potter had known exactly how to beat him going in. He'd lulled his classmate into a false sense of security, then, as Severus had expected, ended the duel with three decisive casts. Draco had been completely humiliated, with Potter even breaking his wand while alluding to a comment he'd made concerning Granger. Severus was anxious to see if the defeat might finally prove to be the impetus for his godson to stop talking and start improving. Lucius and Narcissa had spoiled their son, and Lucius had been remarkably lax in teaching the boy about the culture and customs of the Wizarding world, in contrast to Daphne Greengrass or Theodore Nott, who were extremely well-versed from the day they arrived. Aiden and Richard were fanatics when it came to the old ways. It still baffled the mind that one as cunning and ruthless as

Aiden Greengrass had once slept in the same dormitory as James Potter and Sirius Black.

The man has a penchant for heroics, I suppose, Snape reflected. If the rumors about his involvement with Potter are true, that courage will be put to the test sooner rather than later.

Snape had, of course, known that quite a few of his students were not in their beds on the night of the Winter Solstice. There were literally dozens of Dark Pureblood rituals that coincided with that night, the symbolic conquest of Dark over Light on the longest night of the year. He knew where most of those students had been. Upon learning that Potter had accompanied Aiden's daughter and Blaise Zabini, who seemed to have struck up a friendship with Potter later in the year, Snape had been somewhat surprised. Aiden was more trusting than most, but trusting the last member of a well-known Light family was not the same as inviting him to partake in *Karachun*, one of the more intimate of the Winter Solstice celebrations. As for what Potter had seen that night, or who he had joined there, Severus was uncertain. Potter's rapid progress with Occlumency meant he didn't have much time to poke around before he was stopped or ejected.

Through Aiden, Harry now had a connection with the entire Dark Pureblood community. That was a good thing if he intended to persuade some of them to fight against Voldemort.

And, if what Snape had seen during that duel was any indication, he might soon have more in common with them than they thought.

To Severus, it was absolutely *undeniable* that Potter's Dark hexes and curses were stronger than anything else he had. Not only that, but he seemed less winded when he let loose a barrage of Slicing Curses than when he fired off a group of Striking Curses. This didn't make much sense; the latter was much less draining and difficult than the former. One possible explanation was that Potter simply had more practice with the Slicing Curse, but Potter's first use of the Striking Hex had been a useless strike against the hide of a mountain troll just months into his First Year. He'd taught himself that spell, making use of the amount of time he'd spent along in the Library.

Assuming that he was correct, and Potter indeed possessed a particular aptitude for Dark magic, there were a number of inferences that could be drawn. First, the power that he possessed, which Snape understood to have been obtained as a result of his exposure to the Dark Lord's diary during his Second Year, though now fully integrated into his magical core, might still favor the uses of its former master. Aside from creating a significant image problem, Potter openly declaring himself a Dark wizard wasn't all that concerning; Severus had always believed that it was not how one used magic, or what spells one used, but the *reasons* for which one used magic that ultimately mattered. His former master was an unbalanced despot with a lust for power and control. If Potter continued to fight against Voldemort, and did not develop a desire to rule the Wizarding world for himself, the situation would be entirely different.

Of course, it was impossible to deny that extremely powerful Dark wizards showed a rather alarming tendency to seek power and control of the Wizarding world, far more so than their Light counterparts. Which was why, in addition to sheer numbers, the Light had dominated the Ministry of Magic for most of its existence, and the Dark had been forced to operate in the shadows.

Severus let his thoughts drift away from that subject as he spared a subtle glance at the veritable army of Potter's companions that waited anxiously for their friend to awaken from his unnatural slumber.

Sitting next to the boy's bed, her right hand lying on top of Potter's left, was a miserable-looking redhead. The unlikeliest Slytherin Snape had ever seen Sorted, with the notable exception of her boyfriend. Of course, his first impressions of both of them had been terribly inaccurate.

Though perhaps not as dramatic as his change of heart when it came to James's son, his opinion of Ginny Weasley had nonetheless improved during her second and third years at Hogwarts. He'd had his fill of Weasleys well before the diminutive girl had intruded upon his sacred House. William had been brilliant, skilled, dedicated...and a bit egotistical, but tolerable, to date the most accomplished of Arthur and Molly Weasley's litter of redheaded offspring. Charles had all-to-often reminded Severus of another insufferable Gryffindor

Seeker, and his obvious contentment with the adulation he received had only tightened the comparison. He'd been an unremarkable Potions student. Percival's ambition might have made him the first Weasley to wear the silver and green, but his at-times disgusting reverence for rules and order pushed him out. Why he had been placed in Gryffindor was anyone's guess. He'd been a solid student, a patient learner, and a boy that asked probing and relatively insightful questions. He'd also been insufferable in his own way. *Modesty* was not in his personal dictionary, and it was certainly not a word others would use to describe him.

Then had come Fred and George Weasley. The Twin Terrors. The heirs to the elder Potter's legacy of mindless and intricate torment of their professors. Severus could tell that they were extraordinarily intelligent, and quite powerful. They were also the most brutally juvenile youths he'd ever had the intense misfortune to teach. While capable of brewing incredibly complex potions to use in their quest for laughter and personal amusement, they deliberately failed his class because they didn't like him. He'd given them more detentions than he could count, taken more points from Gryffindor on account of their actions (which included periodically switching identities during class) than he'd taken from any two Gryffindors during his entire tenure at Hogwarts, and probably screamed at them in class more than he had at the rest of his pupils combined. When Ron Weasley, an idiotic, poorly-motivated, unfocused, dunderhead had joined his older brothers, alternating demonstrating his incompetence with tormenting Harry Potter, Severus hadn't had high hopes for the last of the Weasleys.

Finally came the long awaited arrival of Ginevra Molly Weasley. It had come as some surprise to the girl when she'd been Sorted into Slytherin. She'd broken down and engaged in some truly pitiful behavior as she clung to Potter and bawled like an abandoned child. Truth be told, the behavior of her family had been even more despicable, as if they thought her diseased. That Potter had seemed to take the younger girl under his wing was a good thing, although at that point Potter was still living under the shadow of his father as far as Severus was concerned. This youngest Weasley had achieved highly, like her oldest brother, a fine potions student if not one with any real flair or instincts. That shouldn't have come as a surprise,

considering that she was being aided by two of the best students in the next year. She was a good listener, and did almost nothing to give Severus a reason to actively dislike her, even if she did have a tendency to allow a bit of hostility into her voice when she spoke to him. Still, he'd hardly changed his mind about her Sorting because she was a good student.

But indeed, she had proven to be worthy of the House of Serpents. When she wasn't spending time with Potter and Granger, she was most often in the company of two other bright Slytherins: Burly Anne Grunitch and quiet Melissa Quinn. Severus had attended Hogwarts with the latter's parents, including her brilliant Ravenclaw of a mother. The three of them had a tendency for occasionally drawing attention to themselves, but never being caught. It had been through those displays that Snape had finally seen why a Weasley had been Sorted into Slytherin. As she aged, her remarkable mature sense of the world grew, nurtured no doubt by the cynical realism that had become Potter's trademark. It was quite a refreshing contrast from Granger's at-times hopeless idealism. Though the traumas of the last few years were beginning to eat away at even that part of her personality.

Weasley had even proven to be quite advanced for her age. Her magical power was a bit inconsistent, more evident with certain spells than it was with others. Such variation was normal for young witches and wizards, especially those of great talent. And while certainly not on the same level as Potter, Ginny Weasley was at the least a bit above-average in ability, and possessed a sharp mind, good intuition, and a killer instinct that might serve her well on the battlefield, if she could control her emotions.

A model Slytherin she was not. Her at-times vicious temper and aggressive personality was only partly moderated by her natural cunning, and she was not one to remain in the shadows. No, what had brought her into Severus's House was an unquenchable desire to succeed, to overcome her disadvantaged upbringing and outshine her entire family. It was possible that even she did not acknowledge this or even realize that it was her fondest desire, but it was all too obvious to her Head of House. She would go far, if she could survive this war and learn to consider the consequences of her actions more carefully. There was also a certain ruthlessness that had come as

something of a surprise when he had first witnessed a demonstration of it. It had been a rather...curious incident during her 2nd year, involving a fellow Slytherin classmate, a boy named Robert Gannon.

Snape's eyes drifted to the other side of the bed, where his Gryffindor colleague's favorite pupil sat, unsurprisingly in the midst of reading a sizable and aged tome, something about Pureblood culture and traditions. While that was an interesting choice of reading material for the Muggleborn witch, Severus knew by now that Granger would never stand for being under-informed on *any* subject. The result was that her class work tended to drift very close to outright memorization rather than reasoned and careful analysis. Her trust in authority was such that she rarely went with her gut if it contradicted what she had already read. It unfortunately meant that she was quite limited when it came to the art of Potion making. Assuming she survived this war, she'd no doubt make herself a fine career in the Ministry, perhaps for the Committee of Experimental Charms, or another research and development think-tank. More impulsive than her friends, it was quite clear to the careful observer why she had been Sorted into Gryffindor, though Severus still saw her more as a textbook Ravenclaw than anything else. Perhaps one of the reasons that he became so irritated with her dry recitations of the curriculum material was that he had high hopes for her, given her natural intelligence. She was apparently also receiving some sort of private tutoring from Minerva, something altogether beyond the scope of the standard curriculum. He'd pulled those vague details from Potter's mind during their Occlumency sessions. Despite her outwardly confident, indeed at times arrogant, appearance, Severus could tell that the girl was quite insecure, and constantly feared failure. It was something she'd need to get over if she was to get very far.

The remainder of the students waiting silently in the room was a more varied lot, all recent additions to Potter's close circle of friends. Pudgy, nervous, and an utter disaster when it came to Potions, Neville Longbottom paced nervously near one of the windows. The boy was plainly terrified of him, and his dangerous incompetence only made things worse. The son of two ex-Aurors currently residing in the Permanent Ward of St. Mungo's, he'd grown up with his paternal grandmother, one of the most intimidating women that Severus had ever encounter. When Augusta Longbottom spoke in her refined,

steady tones, one listened. But as sharp and graceful as she was, her grandson was forgetful and clumsy. He quickly panicked when things went wrong, losing his self-confidence at times for no reason at all. Severus didn't particularly regret his conduct toward the boy, (who had just thrown him a frightened look and was now looking determinedly out the window,) as he had managed to destroy multiple cauldrons, foul up the most basic of instructions, and nearly injured several of his classmates. When you were *that* poor at something, everyone had a right to tell you so. Still, it hadn't done the boy any favors. Perhaps some good would come out of Potter taking the boy under his wing, although the action itself was quite un-Slytherin-like and Potter's motives remained a mystery to him. They had similar backgrounds, he supposed, both essentially orphans from a young age, both raised with great expectations by strong and powerful women that were legendary in the British Wizarding community.

Still, if his association with Potter had done him any good, it had yet to manifest itself in Potions. Severus would be glad of the day he was finally rid of the boy, after he'd no doubt failed his Potions O.W.L. It was probably for the best. For both of them.

Standing in the middle of the floor, eyes wandering every few seconds, was the greatest of enigmas. Luna Lovegood, a 3rd year Ravenclaw that was unlike any human being Severus had ever encountered. She was *immensely* gifted, although not in the ways that most people would expect of a thirteen-year old. During her first month, after she'd made a few...interesting comments, he'd let his curiosity get of the better of him, and entered her mind. What he'd found was best described as an endless, swirling maze of infinitely changing doorways and halls. A door might open and then the floor would fall out. His first thought was that she might have been insane; such disorganization was common in the minds of the mentally ill. But her schoolwork was quite good, and she seemed capable of following instructions, if not keeping her mouth shut and keeping her inane and delusional theories to herself. It was on his second foray into her mind that he discovered what made her truly remarkable. As he pushed into her mind, he felt no resistance. But almost instantly, she gazed up at him, squinting. Without warning, he suddenly felt the girl's presence in *his* mind. She'd pushed through his seamless Occlumency barriers like they were nothing. He immediately threw

her out, though she never made any attempt to go any further. Nor did she confront him after class, even after he called her up to ostensibly discuss her potion. When he asked her if she had experienced anything unusual, she said that she didn't remember anything out of the ordinary. When no angry missives came from Dumbledore within two weeks, it seemed that the girl hadn't said anything to Flitwick either.

The girl was an outcast from the start, but not in the same way as Potter or Weasley had been. She almost seemed to intentionally alienate others, and her bizarre ramblings quickly earned her a reputation as being quite unbalanced. She didn't seem to have any friends, although he'd seen her exchange friendly greetings with the Weasley girl on occasion. It seemed they'd known each other as children. Severus learned that the girl's Ravenclaw mother had been a brilliant Charms witch with a penchant for experimentation and carelessness. Ultimately, that indiscretion had cost her life. The girl's father had been an eccentric and paranoid Gryffindor known best for believing that the truth was always being hidden from him. It was no surprise that he'd joined the staff of that delusional rag of a newspaper, the *Quibbler*, and was now chief editor. It seemed the girl had taken to repeating the nonsense that he published about imaginary creatures and non-existent government plots, though she seemed to lack his conviction.

Her relationship with Potter had been subtle, but in Snape's eyes, extraordinary, and alarming in the rate at which it developed. His information was spotty, but Potter seemed to believe the girl was responsible for curing his mental illness following his ordeal in Slytherin's Chamber of Secrets. That meant that not only was Lovegood a natural Legilimens, which was exceedingly rare in and of itself, but that without any formal training, she could easily manipulate the minds of others. Potter wasn't seen with her often, but he seemed to think a great deal of the girl and the things she said to him, which evidently weren't the same kind of nonsense she spouted in public.

No, Potter seemed to feel that the inane theories she espoused were nothing more than a salute to her father, and that she was far more than she appeared. During one foray into Potter's mind, he'd stumbled upon a memory that could not *possibly* be real. In it, Potter

had become mad with power, and begun executing his own friends and followers when they failed to swear allegiance to him as the new ruler of the Wizarding world. Harry had fought hard to get him out of *that* memory. It had been connected in some way to the Lovegood girl. *Is it possible she is capable of projecting dreams?* It was almost unheard of for anyone to possess that kind of mental influence, putting aside the fact that she was an untrained thirteen year old witch. *Then again, before Potter met her in Diagon Alley, his mind was a jumbled mess. After, he was whole again.*

He'd have to keep his eye on her. She had the potential to be invaluable, but also extremely dangerous. He also had to wonder how much she used her gift on others. Perhaps, by *knowing* everyone around her in the most intimate sense, it eliminated the need for friends. She knew how everyone thought, who they confided in, what their fears and dreams were...it was a *frightening* thought indeed.

As if to confirm his guess, her eyes lazily drifted to meet hers. Then she turned and skipped across the floor over to Ginny Weasley, whispering something in her ear. The redhead nodded, and threw a look of suspicion at her Head of House, but said nothing, looking back down at her boyfriend.

The last member of Potter's cadre stood off to the side, against the wall. Blaise Zabini seemed to take after his father far more than his famous mother. Stefano Zabini was Arabella's seventh, and last, husband, and the only man for whom she had born a child. A skilled Illusionist, he was adept at remaining hidden while his wife captivated those around her. And young Blaise, who had grown increasingly close to the Boy-Who-Lived, seemed to follow that philosophy. Even now he was an outsider, perhaps more than any of those awaiting the return of Harry Potter to the land of the living, so that he might have an ally once again. The dislike between he and Granger was plainly obvious, although they tended to think about one another quite often, mostly in the most unflattering of terms.

Zabini wasn't the kind of person he wanted hanging around Potter. Idealistic, which in itself was unusual for a Slytherin, arrogant, and glory-seeking, he could be as dangerous as the most foolhardy Gryffindor. A decent Potions student, a fine student overall, really, but

he was dangerous. Severus could only hope that Potter saw through the boy's confident exterior and saw the weak and timid soul within.

"Is there something you want from us, Professor?" Ginny Weasley asked in a perfectly innocent voice. "Or do you intended to stand in that spot for the entire night?"

"I will stand watch over my own Slytherins as long as I see fit, Miss Weasley," Snape replied coolly. "Potter has suffered greatly, and I wish to be on hand in case his condition rapidly worsens."

"Leave it alone, Ginny," Neville said. Snape almost blinked. His presence defended by *Longbottom*? Perhaps the boy simply wasn't of the mind to see a demonstration of his brutal sarcasm and vindictive nature. *That* was probably closer to the truth.

"I suggest you take Mr. Longbottom's advice," Severus advised. "The Headmaster wants one of us to be on duty at all times, to ensure that no one attempts to finish what was started. And with all due respect accorded to your combat skills, I feel that I am far more capable of protecting Potter than you are."

The redhead didn't argue with him, instead looking back to the stricken boy on the bed. She managed to keep her face an emotionless mask. Severus hoped at that moment that he might be able to enjoy another few hours of quiet reflection. He was severely disappointed.

At that instant, the doors to the Hospital Wing swung open, and a massive, mangy beast of a dog blew through them. Severus suppressed a shudder of disgust as the dog leapt into the air, rapidly becoming the filthy, deplorable, mutt of a man, Sirius Black. Severus hissed, enraged. *How can Dumbledore do this to me?* He'd only recently learned that the man was innocent, at least of the charges of betraying the Potters and killing a dozen Muggles and Peter Pettigrew. The latter was still alive, the real spy, and in the employ of Severus's old master.

"Snivellus!" he cried. "Get away from my Godson!" He looked half-mad, more rabid now than he had as a beast.

"Black. A pleasure, as always. And the Headmaster entrusted me with his protection last. I will not leave his side until I am ordered. The boy is in *my* House, Black, and that means I have a bit of a responsibility for his well-being. I assure you-"

Black's dark eyes widened when Snape talked about his responsibility. Most likely the deranged man hadn't taken the news his Godson wore (and flew for) the silver and green, and slept in the dungeons very well. "I don't need your assurances, *Snivellus*," he said, again using that infernal nickname. "I want some time alone with him. That is, without *you*."

"Planning to overpower his friends and take him with you? Dressler didn't take it well the last time you pulled a stunt like that. Leave him, Black. Leave him and forget he's even related to James Potter. The boy despises his father, and isn't the least like him."

Sirius looked crestfallen, but his face rapidly became a mask of rage. "You liar!" he roared. "I bet Harry regrets every single day that he was Sorted into the House of Snakes! No-good Death Eaters-"

"You're *wrong*."

Sirius was halted mid-rant by Ginny Weasley's defiant tone. "What?"

"Harry doesn't regret being Sorted into Slytherin. He's *proud* of it. And so am I." The redhead had risen to her feet. Her brown eyes were cold with rage and contempt, her face twisted into a classic Slytherin sneer. Black didn't seem to have noticed.

"Poor girl, you don't understand-"

"No, it is *you* who does not *understand*," Granger said. Like her friend, her expression was hard, unyielding. Severus could hardly believe his luck. Black was about to be broken before his very eyes.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That Potter's happy here," Zabini chipped in. "That Harry has a friend, and a girlfriend," he said, indicating Ginny, "in Slytherin. That he wouldn't have it any other way. Even if he did, he'd want to be a

Ravenclaw, like his guardian. Certainly not a *Gryffindor*. Harry hates them. They're a bunch of stuck-up, self-righteous gits, in his opinion...well, most of them," he amended, shooting a glance at Granger.

Well spoken, Zabini, Severus thought, if a bit crude.

"If you came in here with delusions of saving your precious Godson from his inner Darkness and Slytherin tendencies, I assure you that you'd best leave straight away. There is nothing to be done for him, because there is nothing *to* be done. He is content, and he is where he needs to be, Black. He's growing stronger, learning the Dark Arts with a maturity beyond his years. They will serve him well in the battle to come. The only thing that remains to be seen is if you will acquiesce to fight along side him. He'd have you as an ally, I believe," Severus did his best to keep his voice level and reasonable. He didn't need Black doing anything rash, although Severus wouldn't mind having the chance to exact revenge for all those years of torment. *Just give me a reason, Black*, he swore. But he knew that Dumbledore wouldn't stand for it. He had an inexplicable fondness for Black, both as a student and now as an *innocent* ex-convict.

The students looked toward him in slight awe, except for Lovegood, who looked at Sirius, a strangely pleased expression on her face. Perhaps she had come out as reasonable and impartial as he'd hoped. *This is ideal*, Severus thought. *Black looks like an insane fool, and I look like a caring and responsible caretaker.*

"The *Dark Arts*?" Sirius gasped, his eyes bulging in their sockets. "My Godson, Lily and James's *kid*, learning the *Dark Arts*? How can Dumbledore possibly-"

"He recognizes the reality of the situation," Weasley said. "Harry's been training in private for some time, but it's recently become evident that his true strength lies with those curses considered Dark. Slicing Curses, Severing Curses, and the like, at least at this point. There are others, of course, that he's experimented with. But you know what? He's still the same Harry. He's kind, compassionate, and bright as hell. Maybe he's different when he's dueling somebody trying to kill him. But he's still a good person, Sirius. And you need to

accept that he's not going to be what you wanted him to be." She crossed her arms over her chest, standing over her boyfriend protectively.

"That's not *true*," the man howled, looking close to breaking down. "I cannot...I cannot allow this. I won't lose him like this!"

"You've already lost him, Black," Severus snapped. Revenge was *oh so sweet*. Black was minutes...no, *seconds*...away from bawling like a baby. The bastard that had tormented him for his entire stay at Hogwarts was finally getting his due. "What did you think was going to happen when you tried to take him away from the only mother he's ever known? When you used the *Imperius* Curse on him? *Think*, Black. The boy *hates* you!" He spat the last, feeling a rush of euphoria.

"*That* isn't really true," Granger interrupted in her maddening way, ruining Severus's moment of glory. Severus made a mental note to downgrade her marks on her most recent essay, a dull and dry piece on the uses of Juniper Grass in antidotes. "Harry doesn't really know what to think of you. He's willing to give you a chance, mostly because Remus keeps telling him to, but he's not all that enthusiastic about it. And he's still sore, and rightfully so, about the *Imperius* Curse you used on him. For one that professes to hate the Dark Arts, you sure use them easily. At least Daphne's consistent."

Sirius looked at her in horror. His relief came, ironically, when Daphne Dressler strode through the doors, followed by Dumbledore and McGonagall. Daphne moved to Potter's beside instantly, and Snape watched with interest as Weasley seemed to flinch back from the Grey Maiden. The older woman didn't even spare a glance at her. "He's waking up," she said matter-of-factly. She brandished the Companionship Ring on her right hand. "I can feel it." There was a blister around her finger, most likely caused by her ring burning intensely during Potter's confrontation with the Dark Lord, and his subsequent brush with Alecto Carrow's poison of choice. Dressler had been ripped out of her temporary coma by the burning pain, and she'd blasted her way through – unnecessarily, Severus thought – and killed the woman in the nick of time. As unfortunate as Potter's life might have been, Fate seemed to smile upon him quite frequently.

Sure enough, Potter groaned. Weasley seemed to overcome her momentary fear of Daphne Dressler and moved closer. "Harry, are you there? Are you okay?"

"...Gin..." he moaned. Relief lit Weasley's face like a beacon, and after slipping his glasses on, she immediately moved to embrace him. She jerked back abruptly as Dressler pushed closer to the bedside. Severus watched that particular reaction with great interest. She wasn't just intimidated by the woman, something that a great number of wizards and witches could be accused of, but she was downright *terrified* of her.

She's seen something, Snape thought. *She's seen the Grey Maiden in action.*

Then he had it. He'd been sent into the Forest by Dressler to recover Weasley after a running battle in the Forest between Dressler, Black, Potter, his friends, Peter Pettigrew, Fenrir Greyback, and the Carrows. And no less than five meters from the terrified girl, he'd seen the mutilated corpse of Amycus Carrow, a cruel and uncreative Death Eater. Neither he nor his sister were known for their brains.

Dear Merlin, she watched Dressler torture and kill that man. I thought her terror was the result of being subjected to the Cruciatus. I was wrong. She'd just seen her best friend's guardian become a monster.

He watched Potter's reaction with great interest, but he didn't seem to notice his girlfriend's fear. He immediately began whispering something in Dressler's ear, and the woman nodded. *He doesn't know*, Severus understood. *He's no doubt heard the stories, but they hardly do that woman's crimes justice. He knows what his guardian has done, and what she's capable of, but he doesn't understand how far she's slipped.*

Severus Snape wasn't sure he was so terrified by the ignorance of another person, to any subject, in his entire life. Watching Potter and Dressler together, it was clear there was a symbiotic relationship, a mutual reliance. One could not function without the other. That was how Potter had managed to forgive the woman for torturing him and shattering his mind. The relationship had already developed past the point of reason.

Severus hadn't been certain it was possible for Dressler to be more dangerous than she already was. He had just been proven horribly wrong.

What to do about it?

Before he could ponder the answer to that question, Dressler stood. "Lord Voldemort has been returned to body. Harry was an unwilling participant in the ritual that resurrected the Dark Lord. Harry dueled him, and managed to survive long enough to get back to the Cup and Cedric's body." She pursed her lips. "Bellatrix Lestrange was there."

Severus was stunned, and like everyone else in the room, he turned to Dumbledore for an explanation. "I have heard nothing of any escapes from Azkaban," he said, his voice tired. "I shall of course notify Cornelius." Not without reason was Severus quite confident that the Minister would refuse to believe it, then do nothing once the evidence mounted.

"I'll send the letter," Minerva volunteered. "You should stay here, Albus. I am certain that there is more of a story to tell."

The wizened Headmaster nodded, and his Deputy Headmistress departed.

Poppy Pomfrey had finally arrived, coming to Harry's bedside with such determined strides that Dressler herself had moved out of the way. The Mediwitch checked Potter's vitals, casting several different monitoring spells on him, and then checking his forehead. The progression from complex medical magic to the most basic of diagnostics was somewhat ironic. Then she moved to the boy's right arm. She cast a Numbing Charm and Clotting Charm on it. Severus had seen the boy's injury from a distance, but even he wasn't prepared for the sight of a blood-soaked *remnant* of an arm. Despite their loyalty to Potter, a number of his friends who had gathered around the bed to check his condition recoiled in disgust and revulsion. Granger was dry-heaving. For his part, Potter stared down at his ruined arm with a strange, distant curiosity. The Mediwitch finished changing the dressing, and removed the Clotting Charm.

"What happened?" Longbottom burst out.

"Flesh-Shredding Curse," Potter replied with clinical detachment. "Voldemort's."

At that moment, Severus felt a rare emotion: pity.

The boy glanced up at the Mediwitch, a primal fear shining in his eyes. "Can you save the arm?"

"Probably," Pomfrey said. "It's completely resistant to Healing Spells, so I'm hoping your own magic can dispel the Dark magic festering in the wounds. You'll need to change the dressings every day until the wounds heal. I'll give you my strongest Healing Potions, but while I've treated a *Diripio* victim before, he wasn't cursed by You-Know-Who himself. So I'm not sure exactly what to expect. Keep that arm numbed, though, or you probably won't be able to stand up from the pain."

Harry had been listening intently, but his fears didn't seem to have been soothed. His maturity and composure at that moment were *deeply* unnerving. While it could probably be explained in part by shock, some part of Potter had been forever changed by his experience in the graveyard. His innocence was gone, completely eradicated by his suffering.

Dressler had taken a seat beside Harry, and was staring at him, deep in thought. On the other side, Weasley seemed to overcome her fears. "Are you okay, Harry? I mean, *really* okay?" she asked quietly. She alone had the nerve to ask the question they all desperately needed to hear the answer to.

"No," he replied without hesitation. "I'm not okay." His voice had finally begun shaking. "I almost *died*. I *should* have died. I'd *accepted* it, really. Accepted that I wasn't going to get out of there alive."

"You're *here* now," Weasley insisted. "You'll heal up. You'll be okay, Harry."

"I don't think I'll ever be okay again, Ginny. Not while he's still out there. Even then..."

The implications of his words began to sink in for all of them. Potter seemed remarkably alert, but also quite distant, as if he wasn't completely there.

Dressler rose. "Harry, you don't need to tell us the details. I'll take care of that end. I'm sorry, but I'm going to need to ask you to call to mind tonight's events, starting with after you seized the Cup's handle."

"He's suffered *enough!*" Weasley protested, seizing her boyfriend's left hand possessively. "He doesn't need to go through *that* again." Granger, he noticed, was nodding along with her friend. So was Longbottom. Lovegood and Zabini remained motionless.

"She's right," Potter said quietly. "They *need* to know." He looked at his guardian. "Can you somehow make a copy. I...I can't allow myself to *forget*. Not now."

Severus was stunned by the boy's request. Surely, given everything he'd suffered, he'd enjoy a respite from the memories. But he'd misjudged Harry Potter once again. He'd made the mistake of thinking of him as a young man. At fourteen, the boy was already an adult.

Dressler nodded. Potter squeezed his eyes shut, while Weasley clamped his left hand like a vise. He moaned occasionally, but the entire exercise took less than a minute. Dressler drew the long gray strand of memory into a vial. She looked to Dumbledore. "We should review this as soon as possible."

"Right now would be an appropriate time," the Headmaster agreed. "Severus, I assume you'd-"

"I'm coming," Snape replied without hesitation. He needed to see. Needed to understand what Potter was going through, so that he could help him. That was his role as the boy's Head of House, wasn't it?

Something more than that, now.

"So am I!" Black said, getting to his feet. Dumbledore nodded in agreement. "I'll be right back, Harry," he said. The young man barely nodded. Dressler seemed to tense slightly, but said nothing.

Severus moved toward the exit with the other three, leaving the teenagers alone. As soon as they'd left, Severus heard a loud outburst of questions coming from inside.

It begins.

A/N: Sorry it's been a while. My beta was busy, and then I couldn't get to the edited draft for a few days.

So, this is the aftermath. Well, at least the (long-promise) Snape narrative was...well, a part of the aftermath, at least. You sort of got a feel for Ginny's personality at this point. Parts of her (namely, her temper, which is tough to just eliminate as it seems to run in the family) remain unchanged, parts of her are very different. I realize that a lot of people really don't like her, but she's here to stay, and so is the way Harry feels about her. I will reiterate that this is not going to be a sappy and perfect relationship. Indeed, the relationship itself is quite fragile, given the potentially explosive secrets Ginny's hiding. It's called "Grey Maiden" for a reason. Daphne Dressler's past, present, and future manifest themselves in all aspects of the series.

I was asked recently why I bothered to write a Harry/Ginny story in the first place. Well, Rowling's use of her aside, I do like Ginny's character. I think both canon and GM Harry needs someone to yell at him and keep him grounded. So there was a need for a relationship. Hermione was never a fit. I enjoy reading Honks, but there was no way it would actually work in this storyline, and she makes a great big sister. I already had plans for the Slytherin girls in Harry's year, GM Luna is a no-go, and I didn't really want to create a relationship with an original (or mostly original character). I mean, what's left? Harry/Susan Bones? A Light Hufflepuff and a Slytherin with Dark tendencies? That's not promising. I didn't put Ginny into Slytherin because it made getting her and Harry together easier. A waaaay back when I first had the idea to do a full re-write of the HP series using Daphne, a character I created for an aborted post 5th-year fic, I

wanted to put Ginny in Slytherin. Besides the added drama, it was easy to imagine her there. The initial plan was to put Harry and Hermione in Ravenclaw, but then I decided I really wanted to make pureblood politics a big part of the series, and it had to be Slytherin. There didn't seem to be a point in taking Hermione out of Gryffindor once I'd made that decision.

One thing you really didn't get a feel for was the way that Harry will react to his ordeal in the graveyard. In this chapter, he's still basically trying to come to terms with the events themselves, burying his actual emotions until he can do some basic analysis. Rest assured, the horrors that he suffered will have repercussions throughout the remainder of the series. In his first real test against the risen Voldemort, he was simply humiliated. He was stripped of his power, his humanity, even his hope. The way that things went is going to create a tremendous amount of doubt in Harry's mind even as wheels of war begin to turn once again.

Daphne killed another person. In front of a very large crowd.

Snape's a really nasty guy. He's on Harry's side, he's powerful, he's quite bright, and he's got a unique perspective on the Dark Lord and his forces. He's still a really nasty guy, interested most in his own survival, with a penchant for grudges, a vindictive personality, and a contemptuous attitude.\

I really don't like Percy. You can probably tell. I'm somewhat undecided on his future. There's the potential for a redemption, where he shows what got him sorted into Gryffindor. There's the potential for him to do something really stupid that will forever alienate his family, too.

Sirius Black is really popular in Harry Potter fandom. Many of you aren't thrilled with the way I've depicted him, or most Gryffindors, for that matter. Sadly, while Ron might yet start to grow up, Sirius's long internment in Azkaban has made his hatred of all that is Dark ever stronger. Harry's seriously drifting to the Dark. They are going to be in Sirius's house. You can see where this is going, and given where they are right now, conflict is inevitable. Sirius also isn't going to think too fondly of Ginny for the near future either. In his defense, he's still

confused, somewhat unstable, and feeling really left out right now. If he can actually settle down, and think, he might change his mind about a few things. But Sirius has been mostly alone for the whole year, living as a dog and eating out of garbage cans. He's terrified by what happened to Harry. And he was described from Snape's perspective. Snape has a tendency to project his own opinions into his descriptions of the world around him.

The events of the last chapter, entitled "And All My Dreams, Torn Asunder" will be from the PoV of Luna, Neville, Hermione, and Harry, in that order.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

Chapter 24: And All My Dreams, Torn Asunder

For once in her life, Luna Lovegood did not *understand*.

She silently watched her childhood friend doing her best to comfort the Boy-Who-Lived, who appeared to still be more than a little out of it. Luna quietly felt that state was conducive to productive thinking, but kept her theory to herself. It was not the time to be controversial. She dared not intrude on Harry's mind, confused and frightened as he was, although he hid it well behind a Slytherin emotional shell. Luna disapproved of such measures. The idea that showing emotion was betraying weakness was simply absurd. Especially in the company of one's friends.

She noticed her Potions Professor's eyes falling on her every so often. The man didn't attempt to enter her mind, however. Luna had been aware of his mental intrusions from the day she arrived. She'd done nothing at first, knowing that he'd find nothing of value in her mind because that was exactly what he was searching for. Someday, she'd let Harry see her thoughts. See her *real* thoughts, that was. As much as she liked Ginevra, Harry was the only one that bothered to understand her. *Quitesad, really*, Luna thought. *It's rather foolish of them to assume I'm loony because I say something interesting only once in a while.*

Then, she'd decided to tell him exactly how much she knew. She didn't really like the Slytherin Potions Master: A miserable, hateful, shell of man, and not the kind she wanted knowing her secrets, or, more importantly, learning the secrets of others *through her*.

It seemed that the man had figured it out anyway. That one time, she'd pushed back, easily slipping past his barriers because she decided to pretend they weren't there. She'd lingered, then allowed herself to be ejected. Luna had gotten a bit of rush out of it, actually. But she'd decided not to antagonize the man, and had instead focused on finding interesting alternatives to the recommended ingredients. After all, she was nothing if not unique. Why should her work be any different?

But she'd soon found she lacked the knowledge to do this effectively, and abandoned the idea. Potions was far too structured for her

enjoyment. Her favorite class was Transfiguration, because Luna could be creative. Well, sometimes her ideas didn't work, and Professor McGonagall hadn't been very happy with the result of some of her experiments. The woman was old, Luna thought, but her reaction wasn't the result of a Nargle infestation, which made the brain go fuzzy, just simple stubbornness that grows stronger with old age. She also enjoyed Astronomy. She'd always liked to stare at the stars, redrawing the constellations in her mind. The Great Snorkak was far more impressive than Leo the Lion, she thought. When she'd told Professor Sinistra this, the small woman had laughed. Luna didn't know what was so funny. The greatest advances in human history had been made when mavericks ignored convention, only to have their theories become a part of convention. Luna would very much like to create new things, but she didn't want them to become convention.

Because then I'll have to come up with completely new ideas. That would be dreadfully boring. Should not the first thing that comes to mind be the best?

Well, Luna wasn't sure she *really* believed that, but it hardly mattered. Her life was a maze of contradictions and paradoxes. What was a few more conflicting thoughts in a mind full of them?

A mental sigh. Luna had found herself questioning a lot of things recently. Her dad had known of her abilities since she was four years old. Her mother had known even longer, before she blew herself up. Her dad, a few years after that dreadful day, had taken her aside after she'd confused Ginny's mother by telling her what ingredients she was planning to use in her special Shepherd's pie, and explained to her that she could not allow anyone else to understand how special she was. In Harry's case, at least, she'd broken that rule. Still, her father seemed to like the Boy-Who-Lived, despite the many terrible stories that were circulated about him.

Harry looked broken, vulnerable. His right arm was wrapped in a massive bandage of white gauze. His face was covered in minor bruises and cuts. He'd been to Hell and back again, as the Muggles said. At least, that's how Luna *thought* it went. Perhaps it was *through* Hell and Back Again? Yes, that made more sense. Hell was a place

where bad things happened. So to go through it would be far worse than simply visiting it.

She turned her gaze to Ginevra, who sat protectively at Harry's bedside. They had once been friends, although Luna could scarcely remember it. Apparently her own mother, Ophelia, and Molly Weasley had been close. She'd even heard that her mother had known Lily Potter. Luna wasn't sure it really mattered. She could tell Harry no more about his mother than he could about hers.

Even Luna Lovegood had been interested by the news of a blooming relationship between Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley. Of course, the cause of her interest was quite different. She'd been rather disappointed with her friend for allowing a childhood fascination to morph into an adolescent crush. Luna failed to understand why people did such things. As was often the case, the boy that Ginny had a crush for did not exist, and probably never had. Yet the crush existed. It was quite odd, Luna thought, for a person to long for something they knew did not exist. Things were different, now, of course. In an ironic twist of fate, Ginevra Molly Weasley had overcome her irrational attraction to the Boy-Who-Lived...and proceeded to develop another one, this one for Harry Potter the Slytherin. And, it seemed, Harry had reciprocated her feelings. She was still puzzled by the question he'd asked her in the Forest. In the midst of discussing his destiny, one that Luna could see plain as day, although the outcome was still to be determined, he'd asked her about his girlfriend.

Luna supposed she might have gone too far in her somewhat-playful efforts to appear omniscient. The truth was that while she was fully aware this wasn't the case, it was far easier to keep Harry's ego in check if she didn't let him know the limits to her insight. And Luna had essentially accepted that as her personal responsibility. She wanted to make Harry think, to question what he might have simply assumed. Sometimes she succeeded. Sometimes she didn't. It was still worth the effort. For if she didn't do it, nobody else would, or even if they tried they would probably fail. And if Harry's arrogance grew, they were all doomed. Luna didn't need to be omniscient, or even have the ability to read the magical currents, to draw that conclusion. It was not coincidence that Harry Potter was always at the center of the clash

between Light and Dark, and the factions that made up each. He was a nexus, a focusing point. He alone could pull the disparate factions that made up the Wizarding World into a force that could match the armies of Lord Voldemort.

Luna didn't know all that much about magical history; while she managed to stay awake in Professor Binns's class, often wondering what it would be like to be a ghost, she wasn't really that interested in the subject. Still, she had heard (words and thoughts) that many Dark families, including some not of the pureblood variety, had been extremely discontented by the defeat of Grindelwald, and lamented not joining Voldemort because they badly underestimated him. They would most likely not make the same mistake again. Voldemort would have little trouble recruiting on the continent, it seemed.

Luna relied on the thoughts of others a bit too often, she felt. Sometimes, she became so focused on every one else that she would forget to think for herself. Maybe if she'd done that, she would have told Harry about her suspicions concerning the fake Moody. Maybe if she'd done that, he would never have had the chance to plant the magical bomb at the bottom of the Lake. Maybe if she'd done that, Gabrielle Delacour might still be alive.

She'd learned from that mistake. Or so she hoped. Though in the end it hadn't mattered, she'd been able to communicate that Harry's *rescue* by his guardian wasn't all it seemed to be. It was a step in the right direction. Luna didn't want to be a hero. She wanted to go unnoticed. But that was becoming more and more difficult, and would soon be impossible. And she had an obligation to the memory of Gabrielle Delacour to use her gifts to save the lives of others. She would put her talents at Harry's disposal. She would not follow him blindly, but she would offer little resistance, even if she felt he was wrong. After all, she'd believed she'd been right to remain silent, and it was clear that her instincts had misled her more than once. Harry had to lead this war. It would not be easy. It never was. But he'd have to be allowed to make his mistakes and learn from them, just as she had.

She could only hope, as she looked upon the unconscious form of the Boy-Who-Lived, that those lessons might be learned without the cost of more innocent lives.

For Neville Longbottom, a state of confusion was as natural as breathing...or so it seemed at times.

For as long as he could remember, he'd been on the outside, desperately trying to prove himself worthy of being treated like something other than a disappointing and weak-minded child. His grandmother had loved her son, his father, holding a place in her heart that Neville could never fill. She'd even grown to love the shy half-blood witch that her son had married: Neville's mother, Alice.

It occurred to him that ever since that conversation with Harry – a lifetime ago, it seemed – he'd been thinking of his parents more and more in the past tense. For although Harry hadn't been gentle, he'd been right. Alice and Frank Longbottom were nothing more than shells of their former selves. The intelligence, the courage, the compassion that the two had been known for was now lost forever. Neville had finally begun to accept that like Harry, he was a war orphan. The...*people* that the St. Mungo's staff claimed to be his parents simply weren't, and that was all there was to it. He'd discovered that this attitude was far less painful when it came to visiting his parents with his paternal grandmother, the fierce and intimidating Augusta Longbottom, the proud and powerful matriarch of an old and storied Light family. There was no longer that small, childish part of him that expected his parents to recognize him, to comfort him, to be there for him.

On his last visit, he'd almost looked upon them as if they were *someone else's* parents. In the past, he might have been ashamed of such thoughts. But as he graciously accepted the gum wrapper that...*Alice* always made a point to offer him, he felt no shame. Instead, he felt more loved than he ever had before. His parents had sacrificed their lives for him, suffered so that he might survive. And he became all the more determined that he was going to make them proud of him, of who he was.

So when Harry Potter, a Slytherin heavily disliked by most members of Neville's own House, but the only person he'd ever spoken to that seemed to really understand him, had made it clear that he wouldn't mind Neville's company, and Hermione Granger, a Gryffindor outsider like himself...well, *exile* would probably be the better term, had made it a point to track him down and invite him to work with her and Harry on various assignments, he didn't politely decline, as he might have in the past. He refused to be ashamed of who he was. It had been difficult to overcome his own shyness, his own ingrained sense of worthlessness. But Harry, Hermione, and Ginny, an exile from her own *family*, had shown great patience. And gradually, as he'd grown closer to them, he'd begun to wonder if he really was worth all the bother. Harry seemed to determined to prove to Neville that that was in fact the case.

First it had been study sessions, then, one day, Hermione had led him out of the Gryffindor Common Room, practically dragging him by the sleeve of his robes, to a deserted corridor on the 7th Floor. Except that less than a minute later, to his great astonishment, he'd seen a door push out from the blank stone, and once it swung open, witnessed an intense and prolonged duel between Ginny Weasley and Harry Potter. He'd been confused, even frightened, but his fears were soothed when after Ginny was knocked down and disarmed, her boyfriend had calmly walked over and helped pull her back to her feet. She'd been grumbling, something she did whenever she lost to him. Harry had just laughed. Then he'd caught sight of Neville.

For a moment, his piercing emerald eyes had locked with his, as if seeking entrance to his very soul. Seemingly content in what he'd seen there, Harry's face had split into a wide grin. He'd soon found himself standing across a dueling ring from his Gryffindor classmate. Hermione had trounced him; that wasn't the point. Because he'd started to learn from his mistakes. Harry had hammered that point home more than any other. *"If you believe you will fail, that you'll never get better, then you will never accomplish anything. But if you believe that with time, practice, and some good advice, you'll learn from your mistakes and grow stronger, then you won't fail. You can't fail. For defeat becomes nothing but a learning experience, a chance to improve."*

Neville had done his best to take those words to heart, to reward the Slytherin's faith in him, faith that no one else had ever shared before. Harry had told him more than once that he wasn't helping Neville because it was the right thing to do. That wasn't how a Slytherin made decisions. No, he was helping Neville because he felt the slightly (although now noticeably less) pudgy, clumsy, forgetful Gryffindor had the potential to be far more than he'd ever thought possible. And because if things went as badly as he thought they might, Harry wanted Neville's wand at his back.

Neville had never felt as terrified and relieved as he had at that moment. But Hermione, as always, had come to his rescue. Ron hadn't really spoken to him much this year, and it had become clear that he didn't approve of Neville's association with Harry, or the way he'd insisted that Harry hadn't entered himself in the Triwizard Tournament while the rest of Gryffindor had been loudly venting their displeasure, and Hermione had gone up to her room to escape the abuse. He might have just resigned himself to the fact that he was alone once again, had not the Muggleborn witch staged a dramatic and angry defense of his intelligence after he'd had a particularly bad experience in Potions the next day. Seamus and Dean had been ribbing him about it, and they'd ended up slinking away with their tails between their legs...literally, as Hermione earned herself a very, very rare detention for magically implanting rat's tails on their posteriors. When Neville had finally found his voice and thanked her, Hermione had gone pink. That incident had occurred just a week before he'd finally learned what Harry had been doing when he'd nearly taken Ron's head off with a misfired Slicing Curse.

Ginny had been an amazing help. She'd tried to help him learn the basics while Harry worked with Hermione and Blaise on more advanced material. Harry was a natural instructor, confident, authoritative, and knowledgeable, but Ginny had done a bang-up job as well. He'd been fit to burst when he'd managed to cast a perfect Stunning Spell, and Ginny had given him a hug while Harry slapped him on the back. He was still a bit behind the others, even Ginny, but he was now secure in the knowledge that he could use his wand without any unintentional destruction of his surroundings. Harry told him he could afford to be quite a bit more aggressive in his technique, but he'd still commended him on his progress.

Now, as he sat anxiously at the Gryffindor House Table, Hermione in the seat to his right, looking as distant and distracted as Neville had ever seen her, he could for the first time say with confidence that he *knew* what Professor Dumbledore was going to tell them before anyone else did. Indeed, if the man was true to form, Neville knew far more than what the Hogwarts' Headmaster was going to tell the assembled students. The Hogwarts Rumor Mill had been cranking them out like never before in the last week, and not even the End-of-Term exams could stop them. Some of the rumors denied that Cedric Diggory was actually dead. Harry had been laid up in Hospital Wing for over a week, recovering from some truly frightening injuries, internal and external. The Cruciatus Curses he'd taken had left him too weak to get out of his bed without assistance from one or more of Madam Pomfrey, Hermione, Daphne, and Ginny. Neville got the sense that Harry was quite embarrassed by the whole thing, something that baffled him.

Harry had eventually told all of them, in vivid detail, exactly what had happened from the moment he entered the maze to the instant he'd passed out on the Pitch, his left arm clinging tightly to both the Triwizard Cup and Cedric's body. His voice had been flat and emotionless, although his composure had threatened to break on several occasions, none more than when he described the cold and brutal execution of Cedric Diggory. Harry blamed himself for Cedric's death; that was perfectly clear. The trap had been laid for him, and him alone. Harry wasn't one to let reason escape him, but the guilt deserved or not, was eating at him.

There had been another *incident*, one he hadn't witnessed because he'd been in the middle of a long conversation with Professor Spout about her choice of material on the exam. The conversation had dragged on well beyond the point of necessity, but his Herbology teacher seemed to greatly appreciate the chance to return to something resembling routine. Later that evening, he'd watched as she angrily assigned two 5th Years detention for spreading rumors that Harry had killed Cedric, but was going to get off because of who he was. She'd told them to report to Snape, and the look of fear in their eyes at that moment rivaled the worst terror he'd ever experienced from the thought of the Potions Master. The plump witch had smiled at him again as she departed. He'd really come into his

own in her class this year, even – with Hermione’s encouragement – seeking her out before and after class to talk to her about some of his private reading. She’d been able to point him in the direction of several useful and comprehensive references, and she’d been most interested to hear about Harry’s experience with Gillyweed. From the way her eyes widened at several points, it was clear that Neville had actually told her a few things she hadn’t known before. She’d been fascinated by the way Harry was able to ascend to the surface rapidly without any ill effects, to the point where both of them temporarily forgot the reasons he’d been forced to take that kind of risk. And then, a few weeks before the Third Task, she’d taken him aside and told him that he was already better at Herbology than *both* of his parents. He’d almost asked her to put that in writing and send it to his grandmother, as proof that he really was worthy of praise. He’d ended up simply relaying his Professor’s words. And Augusta Longbottom’s response had been to say, for the first time in ages, that she was *proud* of him.

He was snapped out of this reverie as he noticed that Hermione was staring at him, concern lighting her ever-curious chocolate brown eyes. “Are you alright?” she asked quietly. He nodded, and she bit her lip. A nervous tic, Harry had told him. “Professor Dumbledore ought to be speaking soon,” she said. “I have to wonder how much he’ll tell them, given what the Minister said.

“Somehow I don’t reckon that’ll stop Dumbledore,” Neville whispered.

“No, I don’t either,” Hermione admitted. Her gaze drifted across the room, to the distant Slytherin table, where Ginny, Harry, and Blaise sat, along with Ginny’s friends Anne and Melissa, with the Durmstrang students sitting alone at the end of the table. During the night, their Headmaster, Karkaroff, had vanished. More accurately, he’d *fled*. His testimony had landed some of Voldemort’s best in Azkaban, and he was now on the run for his life.

Briefly, Neville’s eyes stopped at the Ravenclaw table, where Luna Lovegood sat alone, staring up at the enchanted ceiling. The Beauxbatons students, including the anguished and humiliated Fleur Delacour, sat silently at the end of their table. It was school tradition for all of the members of a House to sit together for formal occasions

and Feasts, and indeed it was accepted practice for the Houses to keep to themselves during meals, but that hadn't stopped Hermione for the last few years. Neville often got the sense she felt no more loyalty to Gryffindor than she did to any other house, so disgusted was she by her classmates' behavior. Particularly that of Ron Weasley, who was now eyeing both of them suspiciously.

"What are you two on about?" he asked. Ron seemed to lack the filter between what he thought and what he said.

"Nothing that concerns you, Ronald," Hermione replied coldly.

Ron glared at her, and Seamus and Dean, who flanked him, also looked quite a bit unhappy. Percy was looking in their direction now, a barely-hidden scowl on his face.

What they had been alluding to was the long-awaited confrontation that resulted from Cornelius Fudge finally taking the time to visit Harry in the Hospital Wing. The man had not thought to inform Dumbledore or Snape, obviously hoping to take advantage of Harry's weakened state, if such a thing were in fact possible. Unfortunately for him, those two had quickly learned of his presence, and he'd entered, flanked by three Aurors, at the same instant that Daphne was leaving. Fudge, whom Augusta Longbottom thought a pompous fool and corrupt coward, had been the very picture of arrogance, wearing formal green robes and his trademark bowler hat. From Hermione's descriptions, Neville thought he'd probably resembled an overgrown Leprechaun, a comparison that only grew stronger when he'd gone red at the sight of the Grey Maiden. Hermione had told Neville that the man had just stopped himself from ordering her to leave. Neville privately confided that it sounded like a great way to get yourself killed, an opinion that Hermione wholeheartedly agreed with.

Fudge had listened impatiently as Dumbledore gave a vague description of what they'd seen in Harry's memories. The Slytherin remained silent throughout, to the point where Fudge had demanded to know if You-Know-Who had struck Harry dumb as well. Harry had responded in a harsh tone that he was indeed perfectly capable of speaking to those that he considered worth the time and effort.

McGonagall had been appalled, but Hermione said Daphne had flashed a predatory smile, and Tonks, one of the Auror bodyguards and Harry's close friend, had coughed loudly to prevent herself from bursting into peals of laughter.

Predictably, Fudge's bad mood had gotten worse. He'd roughly presented Harry with his winnings, ignoring Harry's question of why the Diggory's didn't get half of it when their son had touched the Cup at the same instant that he did. Then, he'd started ranting, calling Dumbledore delusional, Harry an attention-seeking nutcase, and Daphne a danger to society. He'd been stunned into silence when Harry had calmly held out his left arm and ripped off the dressings, asking Fudge if he still thought Dumbledore was delusional. He'd declined the chance to review Harry's memories of the event, suggesting that Dumbledore could have altered them, and they were highly unreliable testimony. He'd been about to go when Harry had called him back, as Madam Pomfrey hurriedly replaced the bandages on his arm. Impatiently, the Minister had turned around.

That's when Harry had let him have it.

"Sir," he'd said. "I never expected you to accept any of this; your record is more than enough evidence of your cowardice and lack of personal responsibility. Thirteen years ago, you allowed more than a dozen high-profile Dark families to escape justice because you didn't want to anger the pureblood community. You'd come into office promising peace, and you were anxious to deliver it and put the Wizarding World at rest. Dangerous criminals that should have rotted in Azkaban for crimes so heinous they still give veteran Aurors nightmares were allowed to go free for the appropriate bribes. So your outright refusal to accept that Voldemort has indeed returned, and most important, returned under your watch, hardly comes as a surprise. Once again, you accuse those wiser than you of being paranoid so you can continue living your peaceful delusion of a life. Somehow, I'm not entirely confident that time will change your tune, either. And in any case, it might not even matter because we don't have time for you to see reason and stop denying the truth because it isn't politically convenient." Harry paused. Though he remained in his bed, it was clear to all who was in command of this exchange. Fudge

had gone rigid. Dawlish and McGlinchey looked outraged, though behind them, Tonks was smirking in satisfaction.

"You dare-" Fudge spluttered.

"I dare," Harry replied, eyes blazing. He commanded the attention of the entire room, holding his audience spellbound. "I dare because I know that I'm right, and deep down inside, you know I'm right too. And I dare because I could bring you down if I so choose. You've built a house of cards, Minister, one that's all too easy to blow over."

"You're bluffing," Fudge said, though he didn't sound like he believed it.

"Even though you never befouled the halls of this castle, surely you know the traits of each House. Especially Slytherin. I have more allies than you know."

"Delusional..." Fudge gasped, face pale, eyes wide as saucers. "Is this the kind of respect for betters that you instill, Dumbledore?"

"I assure you, Minister, that our students are taught proper manners. But I allow my Slytherins certain liberties when it comes to those that fail to earn the respect their position gives them," Snape said softly, a malicious sneer on his lips.

"You really think you can get away with hiding the truth, Minister?" Harry asked. "Can you really expect people to believe that Cedric Diggory dropped dead of his own accord, and that this," he said, proffering his scarred and scabbed arm "was the product of some accident? Even a blind troll could recognize this as the result of a Flesh-Shredding Curse. And the resistance to healing is a trademark of Lord Voldemort's magic."

Fudge looked fit to burst. He'd rudely bid Dumbledore farewell, then declared that he was needed at the Ministry. Tonks had stayed behind, giving Harry a wink, before Dawlish had yelled for her to join them. She'd stuck her tongue out at her little brother, then departed.

As his friends and teachers stared at the Boy-Who-Lived in amazement, Harry had summed up all of their feelings. "That felt really good."

"The wisdom of threatening the Minister of Magic is perhaps questionable, but that was indeed an impressive performance, particularly when one considers it was made from a hospital bed. 40 points to Slytherin for putting that fool in his place," Snape said, a hint of pride in his voice.

Dumbledore finally did rise to his feet. Neville glanced over at the Slytherin table. Harry's eyes were riveted on the Headmaster, and Ginny's eyes were riveted on her boyfriend's face. As usual, Dumbledore's mere presence killed off any remaining conversations. "Welcome to the End of Year Feast," he said. "It is truly unfortunate that we are gathered here today to remember a great tragedy. A young man, full of promise and energy, was cruelly cut down before he had a chance to truly live. And so we remember Cedric Diggory." He raised his glass in a toast.

Most of the students did the same, though a few Slytherins got death glares from Pomona Sprout as they left their glasses untouched. The students murmured "Remember Cedric Diggory."

"However, I will not allow you to depart here believing the Ministry's baseless claim that Cedric's death was a tragic accident. Nor will I allow such a gross injustice to be done to the memory of Gabrielle Delacour, beloved sister of one of the champions. And I also refuse to allow the sully of Harry Potter's reputation. Despite what falsities you may hear in the coming months, I implore you to understand that in facing down his nemesis, and living to tell the tale, Mr. Potter displayed tremendous personal courage, cunning, and magical ability. He was not responsible in any way for Cedric Diggory's death."

That quieted the last whispers. Dumbledore took a long pause, then spoke again. "Cedric Diggory was murdered by Lord Voldemort. Using an ancient and corrupt Dark ritual, Voldemort was returned to body. Mr. Potter witnessed this event, and I have reviewed his memories of the incident. Make no mistake, Lord Voldemort has

returned. The Ministry will most likely deny this, but it is imperative that you know the truth. Another tragic incident that occurred in the past few months was the death of Barty Crouch Junior, an agent of Lord Voldemort tasked with impersonating Professor Moody. The death of Alecko Carrow, a known Death Eater, which you witnessed on the Quidditch Pitch came about after she stunned one of the judges and took her place, finishing what Crouch Junior had begun. Also victims of the Dark Lord were Bertha Jorkins and Barry Crouch Senior, both killed simply because they were in the way."

"These acts, these murders, these plots are not the disorganized and desperate work of madmen. It was a carefully orchestrated scheme executed with precision and ruthlessness. And it succeeded. Lord Voldemort walks among us once more."

The venerable Headmaster turned to look at the cowed Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students. "I wish you to know that in the coming struggle against the Darkness, Hogwarts will stand as a bastion of the Light. But its doors will be open to any who wish for or require shelter."

"Thank you," he concluded, sitting. For a long moment, there was dead silence. Then Neville watched Harry rise to his feet. His eyes still locked on the Headmaster, he began clapping, despite his bandaged right arm. Slowly, his friends followed, including Hermione and Neville. Gradually, more and more students rose to their feet and applauded. Draco Malfoy, Pansy Parkinson, and the blonde's bodyguards remained seated. The applause thundered through the Hall, eventually joined by a number of the leaderless Durmstrang contingent and Madame Maxime's Beauxbaton's pupils. Something shone in Dumbledore's blue eyes as the noise finally began to die down. He stood again. "In light of the events of the last few months, the House Cup will not be awarded this term. If you'll notice, all four Houses of Hogwarts, as well as Durmstrang and Beauxbatons are represented in the decorations. I like to use this as an illustration of cooperation. We are all human. Our parentage, our blood does not make this any less true. When the interests of all are threatened, common decency must prevail. Now, let the Feast begin!"

Conversation was muted as the students ate. Harry consumed his meal like a machine. He seemed terribly distracted, even from this distance. Neville was concerned about his friend. *Was he ever going to truly get over what happened that night?*

Somehow, Neville wasn't counting on it.

Hermione Granger finally let her quill fall silently to the parchment as Professor McGonagall announced the end of their End-of-Term Transfiguration exam. Her first reaction was to fret about all the additional information she'd been unable to incorporate into her theoretical essay, but a more reasoned part of her, one that had steadily grown in influence with Harry's urging, told her that she'd written far more than was expected, let alone required.

She waited silently as her classmates began to stir around her, stretching and confiding their fears of failure in hushed whispers to their neighbors. Harry wasn't there, having been exempted by his participation in the Triwizard Tournament. *A good thing*, Hermione thought. *He hasn't been the same since that night...*

Not that Hermione could blame him in the least, of course. He probably hadn't even told them the whole story of what he'd experienced, what he'd faced that terrible night. He'd seemed reluctant to discuss certain things, and it had taken days for Ginny to coax him into admitting that Cedric had been cruelly murdered right in front of him. Hermione had cried a lot that day, and though he held them back, as only a stubborn Slytherin boy with a misguided *male* belief that to shed tears was to show weakness, Harry had clearly been deeply affected. Ginny had held him for a long time, but though his eyes glistened, the tears had not fallen.

Harry seemed lost within his own mind. He was slow to respond to what others said or asked of him. He gave abbreviated, basic answers when he was forced to. He spent a lot of time in self-imposed isolation in various parts of the castle and grounds, just staring straight ahead, completely lost in his thoughts. His physical wounds had just begun to heal, but the others, the mental wounds, the ones that could not be healed by spells and potions, seemed to

run far deeper than they'd first suspected. There were times where only Ginny seemed capable of getting through to him, and he was far less affectionate with her than usual. But when she would plop down in his lap, refusing to allow him privacy or the use of his legs, he didn't argue.

As if the physical wounds aren't bad enough, Hermione thought as she got up to leave, gathering up the contents of her bag and slinging it over her shoulder. She still got a bit nauseous at the memory of Harry's right arm, displayed defiantly to the stunned Minister of Magic, and earlier, when Madam Pomfrey had changed the dressings on the fresh wounds right in front of them. She'd nearly been sick right then and there. The sight of the rent and torn flesh and bone, the damage done to the body of her best friend, who seemed ridiculously unfazed, was one of the most horrible she'd ever experienced. Harry had also suffered multiple broken ribs, a badly sprained left ankle that left him with a slight limp even now, and numerous cuts and bruises, ranging from minor lacerations on his face and neck to a deep wound on his left shoulder. Most of those were mostly healed, but the bulky white dressings on his arm remained, a constant reminder of all that he had suffered. Yesterday, she'd entered the Room of Requirement to find him practicing his spell-casting...with his *left* arm. She'd seen the frustration, the near-despair on his face, and she'd slipped out without him catching sight of her. He didn't need witnesses to his weakness. Of course, Hermione didn't look at it *that* way, but Harry *did*, and that was what mattered. That he was being ridiculous didn't change the way he felt.

Harry's disinterest extended into his classes. He'd rather carelessly destroyed his own cauldron with a blatant and obvious mistake. Silently, he'd Vanished the remains, though not before fumbling with his wand, which drew sniggers from Malfoy, Parkinson, and Draco's bodyguards. Those had been silenced by the look of pure and unadulterated malevolence that Snape had thrown them. He'd taken no points, not even commented on the assignment, though he'd been forced to give them both a zero. Harry hadn't even apologized, but he'd come close before wandering away to the hiding spot of the day, and she'd tried not to be too hard on him.

But her concern for his state of mind grew with each day. Just hours previous, Neville had happened upon the Boy-Who-Lived sobbing in a corner of the Astronomy Tower, and Harry had screamed at him to leave. Neville, absolutely mortified, had complied, though he'd come straight to Hermione. When the Gryffindor bookworm had gone to the Tower herself, it had been empty, although she now suspected Harry had just been hiding under his Invisibility Cloak. He also had the Marauder's Map, mostly to keep Ginny from finding him, so Hermione couldn't be sure about that.

She hoped he'd manage to move past it. She had faith that he would. Maybe he just needed to be gone from Hogwarts. Maybe Daphne's fanatical training regimen was exactly what he needed. Maybe then he'd finally open up to them, let them help him heal in body and mind. *Merlin knows he needs it.*

Many girls might have assumed that Harry was simply scared and frightened, moping around, being an idiot. Well, the third was true. The first two weren't. No, four years of being Harry Potter's friend had taught her that Harry was far more thoughtful in his actions than the average boy his age. Harry was making the conscious and deliberate decision to alienate them all, because he thought it was for the best. He knew that he was taking a big risk, that he might be taking them all for granted, but Hermione knew that even if that were true, it hardly mattered. There was no chance that any of them would abandon him, no matter how much of a miserable arse he was. Despite the fact that he was obviously and deliberately avoiding her, Ginny's feelings toward him remained unchanged. She'd ranted at Hermione more than once, but in the end, they'd always reached the same conclusion. *We can keep trying, but in the end, this will end only when he decides to end it.*

They could only hope that'd be sooner, rather than later. But, maddeningly, Hermione knew that Harry would never admit to making a mistake in this case. He truly believed that he needed to be alone, and that was that.

It was just one of the many things about Harry Potter that made her both hate him and love him, practically depending on the day of the week. Her friend was an immensely complex and confusing individual,

and at the same time extremely predictable. *Or maybe that's just because I know him so well?* she wondered.

Hermione continued her trek back to the Gryffindor Common Room. She was seriously considering an afternoon nap.

They'd been best friends for a little less than four years, and experienced many things that men and women many times their seniors could not claim to have witnessed or endured. The bond that had been forged as they fought to survive the perils of the defenses guarding the Philosopher's Stone had bent more than once, but it had never broken, and had indeed grown stronger despite a growing ideological divide between them. Hermione was an idealist, although not in the sense of ignorance or misguided optimism, and she was proud of it. Harry was a cold realist. While he occasionally acted out of good will towards others, he viewed the world through cynical eyes, and possessed an overriding belief that *everything* was relative. They were no absolutes, no unchallenged moral standards that had to be upheld. There was only tradition, law, and cultural mores. And of greater importance, there was the gray area that defined what immoral actions a society would condemn and which they would simply tolerate. Increasingly, Harry lived in that gray area, and that frightened Hermione to the core.

"For the Greater Good."

That had been the rallying cry of Voldemort's predecessor, Gellert Grindelwald. His rise, which had begun based on promises of social and political reform, had instead become a personal quest for power and led to an alliance with the Muggle dictator Hitler. And what had followed had been nothing less than the most destructive and far-reaching conflict in human history, Wizard and Muggle. Though the Muggles had been forced to fight on a second front, and wizards had played a role of little importance in the Pacific Campaign of the Second World War, the death toll in the magical community still soared past 20,000, and many of them hadn't been killed in combat. Eastern Europe had lost nearly half of its total magical population, and many more had fled following the rise of Communism, which itself *had* been backed by many of the remaining wizards and witches, who had made up a significant portion of the KGB.

But as Harry had told her, Grindelwald's defeat hadn't been total, nor had it been well-executed. It was true that Dumbledore had defeated him, a childhood friend, in personal combat, but his army hadn't met the same fate. Leaderless, it had fragmented, melted back into the countryside, only to be caught up in the final devastation of Nazi Germany by the mostly-Muggle armies of America, England, and Soviet Russia. From the horrors of firebombing had come an intense hatred of Muggles and their ways, one scarcely kept in check by the Ministries of Magic in the occupying countries after the war. It had been like a half-healed wound left to fester for nearly fifty years. And Harry had expressed his concerns that Voldemort might have a massive army just waiting for the call, an army he hadn't been wise enough to utilize the last time. It was a truly horrifying thought.

It was the same thought that he offered as the primary reason he was so consumed by the need to build alliances, to gather powerful, and most importantly, *trained* allies. Voldemort was going to come at them with an army many times the size of the one he'd mustered in the First Wizarding War, and he'd crush them with impunity if they couldn't raise a cohesive and formidable force to oppose him. Even if Harry somehow managed to kill Voldemort, others would take his place. And though they might lack the once-in-a-generation power he possessed, they'd still have little troubling crushing Wizarding Britain underfoot.

That he seemed to have focused so far on the Dark families, and was learning more and more about the kind of magic they chose to wield was a direct result of his realist attitude, and what he perceived to be his own strengths and weaknesses. It was a cold, practical, logical, and rational approach.

In his own words:

"Hermione, I'm learning the Dark Arts because they are potentially extremely useful. I've shown a great deal of aptitude for them, and I scarcely think the Ministry will mind if it helps me save their useless arses. Besides, they have no precedent for going after me. And Aiden wields a lot of power. I'm safe, Hermione."

He'd misunderstood the reasons for her concern, of course. She didn't care about the possibility of him getting in trouble. She was concerned by the undeniable propensity that powerful Dark wizards had for becoming ruthless, bloodthirsty despots. Like Grindelwald. Like Voldemort.

Was *that* what Harry was becoming?

Hermione could only pray she was just being paranoid.

She'd just entered the Gryffindor Common Room when she saw a pair of identical redheads rise to their feet and move toward her. She tensed slightly, but the Weasley twins seemed unusually subdued. "Hermione?" Fred asked.

She turned to look at them, but said nothing.

"We were just wondering, you see," George said.

"What's wrong with Potter?" Fred asked.

Hermione stared into their eyes in turn, trying to learn the motives behind their questions. She found nothing but genuine concern. "He's still a bit out of it after what happened to him," she explained. "He'll come around."

"Well, you see, that's the thing," Fred began.

"What exactly *did* happen to him?" George finished, somewhat hesitantly.

Hermione pressed her lips into a thin line. "You heard what Professor Dumbledore said."

"Course we did," Fred said.

"We just don't believe he was telling the whole story," George clarified.

"And why should I tell you anything?" Hermione asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Because even though he's a slimy Slytherin-" Fred began.

“– and a right git at times –”

“– especially when he’s playing Quidditch against us –”

“ – too true, oh brother of mine –”

“ –he’s still a friend of sorts –”

“ – and we’re worried about him,” they finished together.

“I’m sure he’ll appreciate that,” Hermione said. “But it really isn’t my place to share that kind of information. Just understand that he’s suffered some deep wounds, mental and physical. He needs time to heal.”

“C’mon Hermione –” George whined.

“Shut it,” Fred snapped at his twin. “If she feels it’d be betraying Harry’s trust, then that’s the way it is.” Hermione flashed him an appreciative smile.

George made a face, but said nothing more for several seconds. “Sorry for bothering you,” he finally said.

“It’s alright,” she replied. “And I’ll pass your concerns along to Harry.”

“You do that,” Fred said approvingly. “C’mon,” he told George. “Lee’s got some new pet he’s dying to show off. Says it’ll be right useful for chasing off annoying girls.” The two stock redheads sauntered off, heading for the portrait hole.

Hermione began her slow climb to the 4th Year Girls’ dormitories. She just hoped Parvati and Lavender wouldn’t already be there. Like Harry, she needed time alone.

Harry stood at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, his Hogwarts robes flapping around him in the swirling wind. The twilight sky was painted with bright oranges, reds, and blues, a truly spectacular sight. Yet it was not the aesthetic beauty of this place that drew the Boy-Who-Lived –*Again-And-Again*, he amended – to this particular, desolate

spot. He turned, staring up the path he had taken. The mountain of a man that he had been waiting for was slowly coming closer. Held with both hands was a large cage. Inside the cage was the same Runespoor that Harry had encountered in the maze. It was time to keep a promise.

If nothing else, I still have my honor, Harry mused. It was the cry of many a disgraced pureblood wizard. And while others assured him that there was no shame falling victim to Voldemort's machinations, Harry wasn't listening. He'd been overconfident, too focused on winning the Tournament to understand the importance of the events transpiring around him. He'd been too wrapped up in his own ambitions, he'd become complacent after the capture and death of Barty Crouch Junior.

Making things worse was that Moody, the *real* Moody, who had resumed his teaching duties with a reluctance and hesitance that defied everything he'd ever heard about the legendary Auror, had warned him again making that very mistake.

The scarred man's eyes, both of them, stared hard into his own. His protégés' own blemishes scarcely compared to the those of her teacher. "The Dark Lord works in many ways, Potter. And most of the time, we don't notice the danger until it is too late. Voldemort's never been one to quit. He may have failed, but he'll re-group, change strategy, and try again. Constant Vigilance, Potter," he growled. "You can't afford to be complacent."

And yet that was *exactly* what had happened. With Crouch dead, Harry had turned his attention to his training, his preparations for the Third Task, his alliance-building and ally-gathering, Bloody Hell, he'd probably thought more about *Quidditch* than the possibility that he might still be in mortal danger from agents of the Dark Lord.

Daphne hadn't taken her failure well. Her demeanor recalled another time when she had been driven into depression and self-loathing because of another failure, one that Harry still bore scars from. He tried to push those memories away, shoving them back into the dark recesses of his mind. But no matter how much his guardian tried to hide it, the shame was killing her inside. She felt *humiliated*, Harry

knew. The Grey Maiden had been bested without firing a spell. She'd failed to protect Harry once again, and he'd been used to restore their greatest enemy, Lord Voldemort, to his body. Harry had tried to tell her that she shouldn't blame herself, that the Carrow bloodline was full of assassins and spies, those adept at concealing themselves in shadows and striking without warning, that she couldn't expect to overcome the fact that she was *human*, and that every human being made mistakes.

It was no use. Daphne would never forgive herself, and Harry could never make her forget it either. His guardian's mental state was just a late addition to the anxieties and concerns arcing through his mind.

Harry idly scratched at his bandaged right arm. The wounds from the Flesh-Shredding Curse had begun to heal, but progress was agonizingly slow. It wasn't a sure thing that Harry would still have full use of his right arm even if they did. Healing Magic was quite advanced, but certain intricacies of bone and sinew were beyond even its powers. He'd started practicing with his left hand, just in case. It hadn't been easy. If he was forced to make the change permanent, he'd have a lot of work ahead of him to just reach where he'd been before he'd entered the Maze.

He wanted nothing more than to be alone. His friends were lovely, and they cared for him a great deal, but try as they might, they couldn't help him right now. This was his burden, and his alone. Their own trials would come, and bring with them their own responsibilities and failures. There was no need to saddle them with his. He had to admire Ginny's tenacity, including somehow casting a Tracking Charm on his belt. He'd detected it immediately, and disabled it, but it demonstrated the lengths she was prepared to go. Maybe he was being a lousy friend, even a lousy human being, but he just didn't *care* at the moment. Hopefully they'd forgive him. It was possible they wouldn't. Harry didn't think it likely.

Some would say I'm taking them for granted. They'd be right. I don't deserve such loyalty, but I make loyal friends. Go figure.

Still, he'd have to find time to apologize to Neville for damn near scaring him to death. He'd been driven to tears by his inability to cast

even a basic Slicing Curse with his untrained left hand. Angry at himself, angry at Voldemort, angry at fate, he'd instead vented it at a completely undeserving individual.

He refocused on the present. He had a job to do.

Dark eyes shined out behind the dark, bushy beard of Rubeus Hagrid. The Hogwarts Gamekeeper wore an expression of steely resolve, mixed with a dash of puzzlement, as he gently lowered the cage to the ground, retreating a few steps. "Yeh still gonna go through with this?" he asked. His words came out in a low growl.

Harry nodded. He stared back into the Forest. "I made a promise, Hagrid. What have I left it I can't keep my promises?" *Interesting paraphrase*, Harry thought. He wasn't sure where those words had come from, but they had effortlessly rolled off his tongue. *Sounds good, anyway*.

Hagrid merely grunted. "Yeh want ter do the honors?"

Harry didn't respond, except to flick his left wrist. He cursed as the holly and phoenix feather wand shot through his fingers. Embarrassed, he bent to pick it up, cheeks flaming. Hagrid to his credit, looked away, silent as the grave.

Finally, he pointed his wand at the magical locks that held the cage door shut, and with a quick and powerful Unlocking Spell, disabling them all. The door swung open, clanging loudly as it struck the adjacent side. Tentatively, the Runespoor slithered out into the open air, led by the planner. Harry turned to Hagrid and gave him a meaningful look. The half-giant nodded, picking up the cage and walking back toward his home, leaving Harry alone with the Runespoor.

"I've done as you asked," Harry hissed.

"Indeed, you have," the critic replied, sounding somewhat shocked.

"You are free now," Harry told them. "Free to roam the world as you wish. No wizard will ever stake ownership to you again. If by chance you should be captured, no prison will hold you."

"You have arranged this?" the critic asked.

"I will, if you'll let me." Hermione had done the research, Daphne taught him the spells.

"We trust you, speaker. You have not betrayed our trust yet," the planner said.

"Never before have we encountered a human such as you," the dreamer said.

"And, I suspect, we never will again," the critic added.

"I'll take that as a yes, then?"

The planner's head bobbed up and down. Harry pointed his wand at the creature, then waved it in a series of intricate patterns and swirls, muttering Latin under his breath. He felt his magic swell and burst forth, locking on to the Runespoor and vanishing into its very skin. When he was done, Harry lowered his wand

"A similar spell once saved me from death," Harry said. "May this magic serve you well."

"You are troubled, speaker," the dreamer said.

Harry blinked. "The person you spoke of before, the 'snake-man,' I believe it was, has returned."

All three heads hissed in dismay. "Then the Darkness has fallen upon the land once again," the planner said.

"It has," Harry said. "And it's going to be a long, hard battle to ensure that morning comes."

"If you should need our help, speaker, call our name, and we will come. We owe you something that can never be repaid," the planner said.

"I'm afraid I don't actually know your name."

"We are called *Eripheus*," the planner said. "We do not know how we came to be called this name, but it is the only one we have ever known. Goodbye, speaker. And Good luck."

"Goodbye," Harry echoed softly. The three heads stared at him for a moment, then the Runespoor began to slither into the Forest. Then, it stopped.

The dreamer stared into his eyes. "You cannot do it alone, speaker. You have many friends, yes? Let them help you."

With that, it was gone.

His heart heavy with a million emotions, Harry slowly headed back up the path. He would heed the dreamer's advice return to his friends, he decided. He'd had his time to think. He'd had his time to consider each of his choices, and, hopefully, to learn from his mistakes. It was time to move on.

The sun had nearly slipped beneath the horizon. As Harry reached the half-way point, it vanished. The sky grew darker. Ominous dark clouds had been gathering throughout the afternoon. A dull boom of distant thunder shook the air.

A storm was coming. A storm that would destroy him and everything he held dear unless it was stopped. There was no shelter from this storm. There was nowhere to hide, nowhere to run.

I don't really have much of a choice, do I? Harry thought grimly.

He *would* drive back the storm...or he would die trying.

FINIS

A/N: Hurray! Another one done! WOOT!

So, how was *that* for an ending? I don't think there's much doubt what Harry's going to be up to next year.

Some comments on this chappie:

That's Luna's brain. It's not quite as messed up as I had planned (a long time ago), but there has to be a limit where her strangeness ends and her abilities begin. You can see the attitude she has toward all of this is vastly different from all of the other characters, and that's intentional. It's nice to have a change from the normal Gryffindor/Slytherin dynamic. Luna has a tremendous role to play in this story, and while I realize that JKR never intended for her to be this superpowered, I assure you that she'll end up doing something more than once that only she could do. Harry's power manifests itself differently, more conventionally. But there are all kinds of magical gifts.

Neville is developing, faster than I'd anticipated, actually, and I'm pleased with that. He's an important presence, as sort of a somewhat less worrisome Gryffindor influence on Harry's runaway ambition. He also has a great deal of potential, although that's relative to the average wizard. As of now, he doesn't have any unique abilities, and I don't think he really needs them. I really believe that his changed mindset concerning his parents and grandparents was vital for his character to turn out the way it has. Harry did that for him, and his patience will be rewarded.

Hermione's back on track, pretty much. I really don't like what I did with her in SoD...actually, I'm really not all that pleased with most of the character interaction in SoD, but it's all a learning process. I hope you feel the same way I do that this installment was much better in just about every aspect. Hermione is always going to have a heavy sway over Harry, though he's learned to ignore her when he's determined to. I realize her character isn't all that likable at times, but she means well, her innocence is a product of her Muggle upbringing, and her power...well, that just makes things a whole lot more interesting. You'll see what I mean. But she's still more reliant on her books than her wand.

I hope you liked Dumbledore's speech. He staged a real defense of Harry, because this time he knows that Harry isn't well-liked and rumors have been spreading. He was a bit more passionate than he was in canon, but I thought that was fitting.

Ah, the Harry vs. Fudge thing is like an asp chasing a bumblebee. Fudge has his nest to hide in, but Harry's a lot more dangerous than Fudge will ever be, despite appearances. I thought that his growing self(sometimes over)confidence was really demonstrated by the way he read Cornelius the riot act. That was very satisfying to write. Lord, the system of government in the wizarding world is screwed up. It's a single-executive democracy, integrated into the feudal system post-Magna Carta (with the purebloods acting as the elites that essentially ran Parliament for quite some time after it was first formed), completely consumed by corruption and incompetence, as well as racism (toward Goblins and other creatures of "near-human" intelligence). And they think we Muggles are primitive? Really, while I've kind of added new layers to the system, my Ministry isn't all that different from JKR's. Harry just has a far better understanding of how it works.

Dolores Umbridge, in all her pink and fluffy glory, will be present in the next book. rubs hands together in anticipation of the confrontations between her and Harry

Thanks again to all my readers for sticking with me. I really appreciate your comments and feedback, and as I've said, it really is important to help me keep this thing grounded in reality.